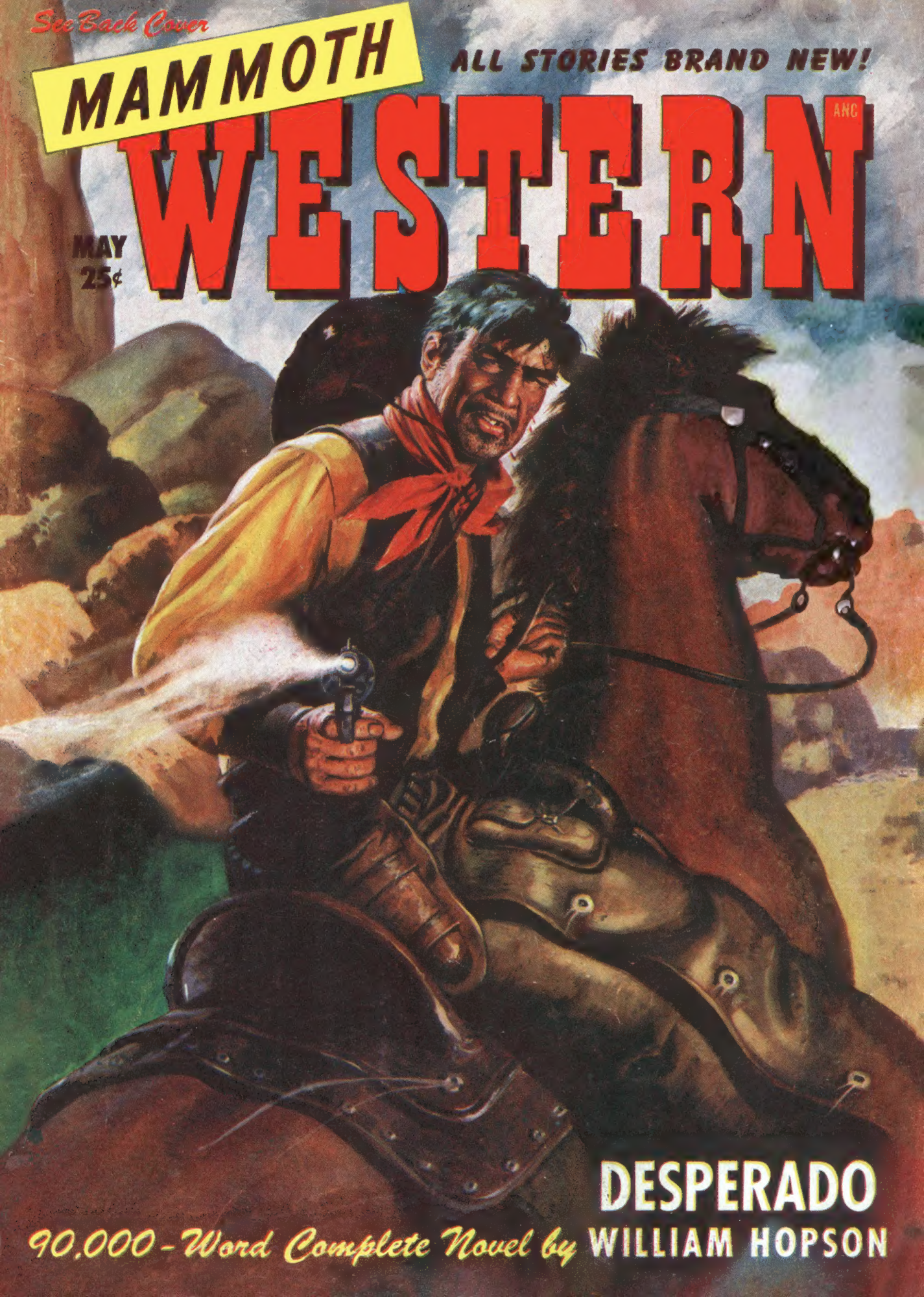
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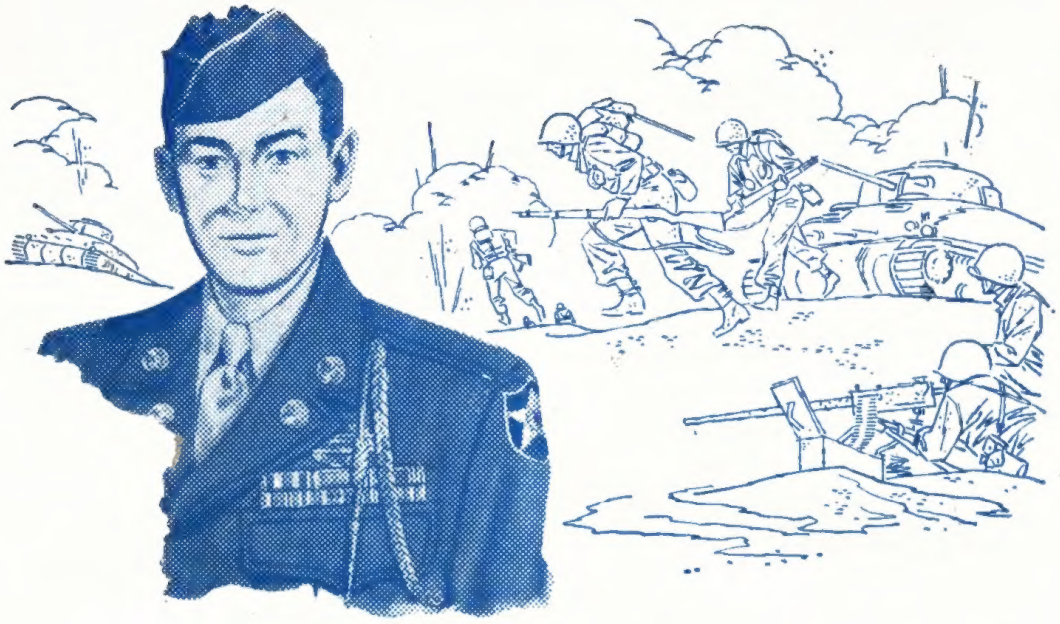

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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating a scene from the lead novel, "Desperado."

Back cover painting by Walter Haskell Hinton, illustrating the American Indian series—The Iroquois.

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RIDIN' HERD with the Editor

THAT favorite of all of us, Bill Hopson, is back with us again! This time it's "Desperado," so sit down for some fine reading. Bill can't do a bad story even if he wants to. It's in his blood to write good Westerns, the kind with the authentic flavor, and automatically when he sits down to his typewriter, the real McCoy comes out. The funny thing about "Desperado" is that it's such a simple story—it's only about a kid who grows up—but he grows up in a hurry! One day he's working his father's farm, the next, he's cleaning his gun barrel. There is none of the false melodrama to this story. It's honest and sincere and like all Hopson's stuff, it's jammed with authentic little details that make it a pleasure and an education to read. That doesn't mean that it's not crammed with fast action—there's not a dead moment in it. From beginning to end, you'll be fascinated with Jude, his problems and how he solves them. When you want to know the Old West, in its grim and bitter reality, read Bill's stuff. Ridin' herd on cattle bound for a railhead takes more than fancy boots and chaps. A ten gallon hat doesn't make a cowboy. Bill Hopson knows this and that's why his stories, like "Desperado" ring with reality and with fact.

SPEAKING of fact and authenticity, Lathrop W. Hull who's coming up fast with a novel shortly, goes out of his way to get the details on a story too. The other day he dropped in the office with a manuscript and a letter from the Winchester people. It seems that he was in doubt about when the rifle, caliber .44, Model 73 came into use. He didn't take any chances. He wrote to the Winchester people and got the correct dope on it. It seems it came out in 1873 as he had suspected, not in 1871 as some one had told him! There is no limit to what the boys will do to get the right dope. It may not mean much as far as the thread of the story goes, but it's satisfying to know that you're not reading a mass of faulty information. The wrong info' doesn't help a story any. What say?

IN THIS issue we're by-passing *The Reader Rides The Range,* which we brought back so recently. We hate to do it because it's such an interesting department judging from the comments we've received, but unfortunately we had to go to press in a hurry with this issue.

"BIG MAN" by Guy Archette is as usual, first-rate. Guy's stuff is no novelty to you and we're sure you'll like this story as much as you have his others. When a good Big Man tangles with a good Little Man the results are unpredictable in spite of what the old saying says!

JOHN DI SILVESTRO comes back again with his "The Price of a Leg." Remember back a few months ago when we gave him his first hit with MW? Well, he tried us again, and again we think he has hit the jackpot. The story has a funny angle. It seems there was an old reprobate gambler who almost lost his leg and he promised the Lord that if he *didn't* lose it, he would go out and preach the Word, which he did, but then . . . that's enough. We have that habit of giving it away.

"WE GOTTA Be Dignified, Mac," by Alexander Blade, is "different" story. This is really off-trail for two reasons. It has a modern setting with the Border Patrol, and it has quite a few "slick" touches. In fact, it was originally aimed at the "slicks" but we got first crack at it, and now we're glad we took it. It is good!

YOUR editor is feeling mighty proud and happy these days. In last month's editorial we raved and ranted for one of the best causes we could think of—the Navahos and their rough situation. The response was so overwhelming from all sources that we're sure it is going to be an entirely different world for those proud Indians. Food and money and clothing—jobs and self-respect—all these things are coming their way, thanks to you Americans who realized what an injustice was being done. We can say once more—they were good enough to die for their country and they're certainly good enough to live for it!

AS WE said before, keep the letters coming in. We intend to make *The Reader Rides the Range* a regular feature of the magazine and we want all the letters you care to write. We'll publish as many as we can, whether they're for or "agin" us. Controversy is meat and drink to your editor. By the way, we don't need to tell you to pay particular attention to the American Indian series that we've been running lately. So long for now . . .

RAP.

MISS CANARY

BORN Martha Jane Canary, the character of whom I tell is better known as Calamity Jane. Jane was indeed a character, and she acquired great notoriety because of her eccentricities. Yet only in the frontier environment in which she lived, in the wild, lawless days of the West of the nineteenth century, could a woman like Jane find such scope for her activities, such undisciplined outlet for boundless vitality. In quieter, more civilized times, Jane would probably have been a sadly frustrated and discontented individual, had she tried to live in the pattern of a conventional community as the proper Miss Canary; instead she led an uninhibited, abandoned, adventurous life as the famous Calamity Jane.

As an impressionable young girl in the 1860's, she came with her father to Virginia City, Montana, which at that time was the center of one of the wildest gold rushes this country has ever known. Jane looked about her, admiring the freedom, the excitement, the air of unrestrained adventure. She decided that she herself could become as rootin', tootin' a Wild Westerner as any man. Before long she began to boast that she could outride, outshoot, outcuss, outsmoke, and outdrink the best of them. She dressed like a man, smoked strong cigars, drank the toughest miner under the table, and professed to fear nothing on this good green Earth.

Throughout the West she moved in the years of her youth. She travelled with Custer's army for a while, in the official capacity of scout. Fortunately for her, she pulled stakes and left before the disaster in which Custer encountered Sitting Bull on the Little Big Horn River. Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, the Dakotas, all knew her well.

She is known to have been married, legitimately, at least three times. But true love came to Miss Canary only once, in the person of Wild Bill Hickok. When she met him, while in her early twenties, he was surrounded with glory. He had forty notches on his gun, and was famous for his feats of daring, and his bravery when the odds were against him. To Jane he was her man, and history does not say that Wild Bill resisted her. The affair ended in tragedy, however, when Hickok was shot in the back while playing poker. Jane wept at the funeral, and from then on her downward course went faster.

Here is one of the many stories told about Calamity Jane which illustrates how her reputation grew, and shows the awed respect with which she was regarded when aroused to anger, which was often. It was in Deer Lodge, Montana, and Jane entered the Brewery Saloon there one day, carrying a bucket which she wanted filled with "suds." One of the boys at the bar, who had been imbibing a little too freely, suddenly decided to play a practical joke. Foolishly, he threw a lemon, and the thing hit Calamity on the ear.

The lady's response was instantaneous. Slinging her bucket of beer through the mirror hanging over the bar, she demanded of the suddenly silenced assemblage, in her most lurid wordage, who had had the effrontery to hit a lady with a lemon. When no one answered, she backed to the pool table and without any more ado began hurling pool balls. There was a mad rush to the door, for a pool ball in the hands of Calamity Jane was a deadly weapon. In a few seconds which it took for the room to clear, there was one casualty, a certain Bud Brown, who woke up several hours later wondering what had happened to him, and then spent the next few weeks recovering. "Soft-headed," scorned Calamity, when told of her victim, though another of the missiles had torn a hole almost through the wall of the saloon.

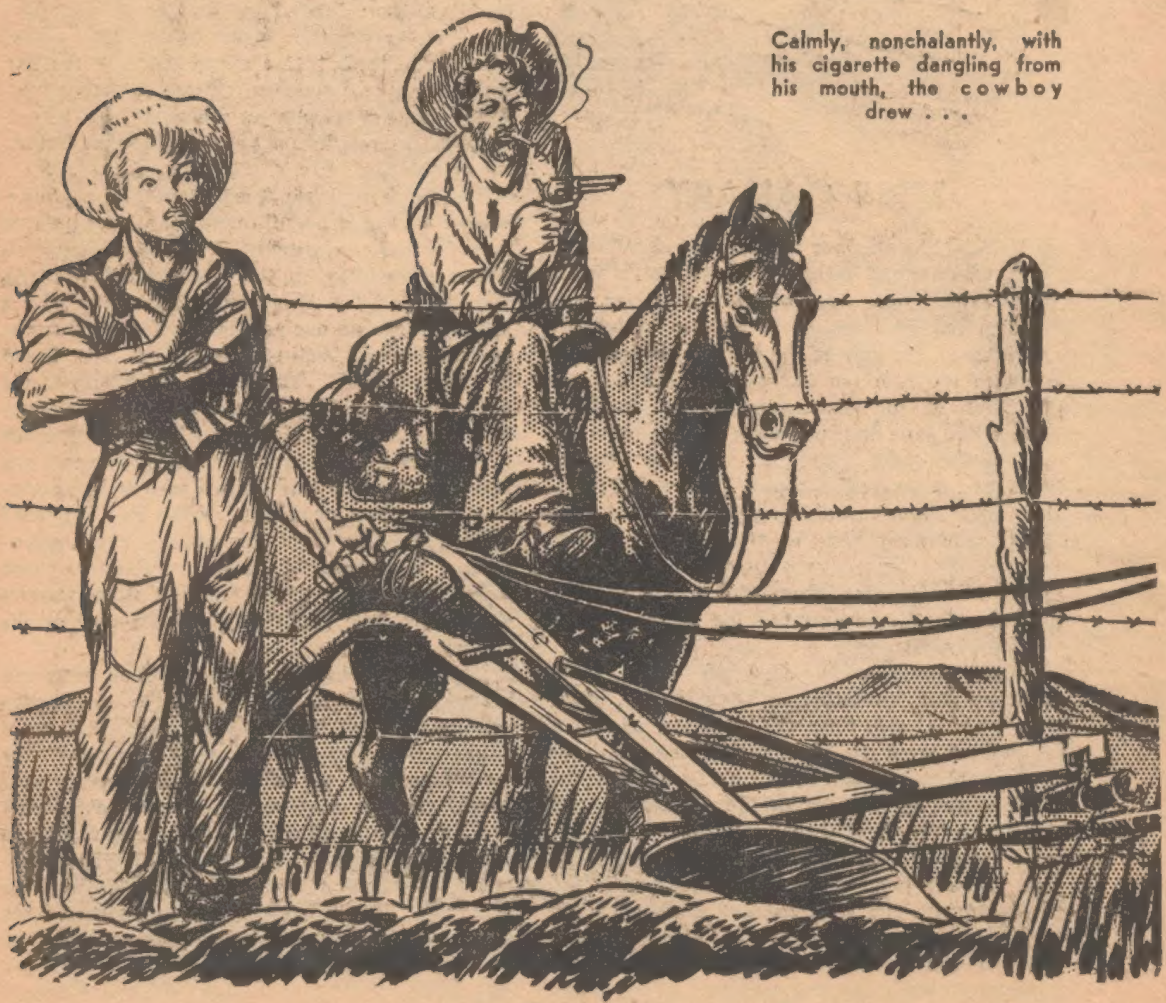
Jane's swashbuckling youth was soon over, and her stock began to fall. Habitually drunk, she haunted saloons begging for liquor, and more liquor. The woman who had for a time been the most famous in the West, found herself treated with increasing contempt. She did any menial work she could find for a few pennies, which she spent for whiskey. Her end came in the poorhouse, on August 2, 1903, when she was fifty-one years old. Pitying townspeople, remembering her hey-day of grandeur, furnished the money so that she could be buried beside Wild Bill Hickok, her real lover.

—By Frances Yerxa.

DESPERADO

by William Hopson

Jude grew up over night—changed from the easy-going farm boy to the killer, fast—while Blackie's smile changed to anger and then fear



Calmly, nonchalantly, with his cigarette dangling from his mouth, the cowboy drew . . .

J. Tillotson

THE field covered twelve acres of what once had been flat prairie land, and it was at that time of the year when the crops had been laid by. But Jude's father was a firm believer that no son ever should be idle for a moment, particularly on a dry land farm; a big, brutal, hulking man who was a hell roaring drunken devil one moment and a God fearing, Bible quoting fanatic the next. That was why Jude still worked in the field that afternoon when the Texas trail herd lumbered by. The encroaching weeds beyond the strong fence always seemed diabolically eager to crawl under the lower strand of barbed wire and emplant their roots among the corn that now waved in a sea of green, the stalks rustling softly in the slight breeze that had sprung up.

His father was a good farmer; enough that, instead of planting close to the fences to squeeze into the crop every possible stalk, he planted wide, leaving a twelve foot belt between the fences and the green. And Jude had been plowing this belt, pushing back the weeds by turning them under, making long bright furrows in the cool earth; for it had been a good year. Plenty of rain and just the right amount of sun.

Jude said, "Whoa, boys," and eased the span of big bays to a halt. They were sleek, well fed, and as strong as oxen. That was one thing about his father: His was the best farm with the best equipment in the country. But then, Jude thought, he'd got the jump on so many of the hundreds of others who were wrestling life and some kind of hoped for future security from the soil. Jude's mother had furnished the money. That and a fanatical devotion to hard work from daylight until dawn had done the rest.

Jude wrapped the lines around the handle and walked over to the fence, placing a dirt encrusted shoe on the lower strand. He leaned there, his eyes on the herd. This was the third one that had passed within two weeks and each time some kind of a strange tingling went up along his young spine at the sight. There was something about those wild, longhorn cattle, about the ragged riders, as wild looking as the steers, that stirred the imagination. They were free men who owed the world nothing except, perhaps, a fierce allegiance to the outfit they worked for; a loyalty that too often was backed up by the roar of six shooters and Winchesters.

Jude leaned over the top strand and drank in the sight.

A half mile to the east of him the leaders were beginning to come abreast of where he stood. He saw two men riding at the head—point—and the thought unconsciously pushed itself into his mind that they were leaders, like the lead steers that plodded behind a few yards away. The dust began there, gathered in intensity and roiled back alongside the long lumbering line of cattle; so thick that the men along the flanks wore their bandanas up over their noses. He had seen them close up once, and they somehow looked like desperados or stage robbers.

A rider back along the herd suddenly spurred out of the dust and came toward him at a lope. Jude stood there watching him, the tingle hitting his spine. It was the first time one of them ever had come this way. He knew that they hated farmers —whom they contemptuously referred to, in all classes, as "damned sod-busting nesters" — and the farmers hated them equally as well. One hundred and fifty miles to the north lay Abilene, in the first flush of its cattle and railroad boom; a hell-roaring town where the last of the starving buffalo hunters now reduced to the ignominious job of hauling the whitened bones of the animals they once had slaughtered by the thousands, mingled with tough, drunken trail drivers up from the south from long drives and tearing the town apart in wild sprees before heading back to the loneliness and hard work of the range.

The cowmen hated the flat land farmers for plowing under the range, and the farmers hated them because, when they came through, sometimes pure hatred sent a herd trampling down fences and fields and sucking up even the few head of stock the farmers owned. They had protested, cursed, and threatened helplessly—all in the face of contemptuous grins as the herd taking their stock with it, moved on. They were helpless to do anything about it, and that helplessness alone fired their hatred to pitch heat and caused them to steal and butcher every stray they could lay hands on.

The rider came on, pulling his sweaty claybank to a halt beside the fence, and

Jude thought he had never seen such a magnificently wild figure of a man. He was tall in the saddle, about twenty-eight, and had the blackest hair a man ever saw .... though just now it was so shaggy it almost covered his ears. His faded flannel shirt was out at the elbows of the sleeves and over the left breast was a large tear, exposing a six inch area of browned skin covered with a matt of black hair. His leather chaps were held together only by a patch work of rawhide thongs, and one spur on a worn boot had lost a rowel. It had been replaced by a fifty-cent piece of silver. The man wore two guns.

"Hello, nester," he said.

"Howdy," Jude said.

"Seen any herds passing by lately?"

"Three."

"When?"

JUDE took out a nearly full tobacco sack and rolled himself a smoke. He caught the almost hungry, quickening look in the man's black eyes, a brief, hidden flicker the rider of the claybank hadn't intended him to see. Jude held out the sack, dangling on the end of a string. "Smoke?"

"Thanks." The rider lifted reins and touched a rowel to the off side of the horse. It sidled over and the man bent from the saddle, straightening again. He rolled, took the proffered match, sighed and held out the sack.

"You can keep it," Jude said. "I got plenty more."

The rider reached into a pocket and brought out a silver dollar. He flipped it through the air. His eyes became a little hard as Jude remained motionless over the top strand, the big round coin plupping into the damp, newly turned softness of the field. "I said you could keep it," Jude said.

"Won't take cowman money, eh?" asked the other. A faint touch of amusement had come into his eyes.

"I said I got plenty more."

"I see," replied the other, and for the first time he smiled. It was an easy-going, friendly grin. "Thanks, nester. About those cattle. When?"

Jude shifted his weight to the other foot and put another elbow over the top strand. "First about three weeks ago. Two mile east of here. Busted down all the fences and stole all the stock. Second about a week ago. The third day before yesterday. Same track you're following."

"See the brands on that last herd?" His voice had become sharp.

"Two of their steers strayed over this way. NP on the left hip. No road brand."

"Hmmm." A pause while the rider smoked thoughtfully. He turned in the saddle. One of the men riding at point had broken away too and was loping toward them. The two gunman turned his attention to Jude again. "What happened to the two strays?" he asked, and again Jude caught the faint touch of a saturnine smile in his handsome, rugged face.

"One hind quarter is over in our meat house," Jude said calmly. "The others are scattered around among some other farmers."

The rider leaned back and laughed. It was a rich laugh, and Jude somehow liked him, even if he was one of the men who were sworn enemies of the farmers. "You damned nesters," he chuckled. "Good Texas beef must taste good after salt pork."

Jude felt himself begin to freeze up a little. "We eat a lot of chickens and kill a pig now and then and got a garden," he said coldly.

The rider looked down, amused tolerance in his eyes. "Okay, nester. I'm hunkered. How far is it to Abilene and which way?"

Jude lifted a left elbow and pointed, a course of about twenty degrees east from the one followed by the herd. "Hundred and fifty miles. You'll come in about ten-fifteen miles to the west the way you're traveling."

"Thanks."

The rider turned in the saddle as the second man came galloping up. One look at him told Jude that this man was the boss. He was tall, about six feet two, ragged as the others were ragged, with a long drooping mustache and a pair of piercing blue eyes. Authority showed in every movement of his body, in the flick of his eyes; authority and almost arrogance.

"Well, Blackie?" he snapped out. "What'd the kid say?"

"Day before yesterday."

This would refer to the NP herd. "Late, almost dark," Jude added. "They camped four miles ahead at Gramma Creek. They allus do," he added.

"So they got in ahead of us?" the tall man said.

The other nodded. "I reckon. And if one of them gets drunk in town and talks loose, such as admitting they stampeded us, I'm going to have a little score to settle with Harrison. And collect for a new shirt."

Jude looked at the tear and somehow he could picture that big black haired rider running amid stampeding cattle, and maybe his horse going down in the middle of the night amid rain and lightning. There had been much rain of late. That was why the corn waved so beautifully in the field.

"How far to Abilene and where?" rapped out the foreman or trail boss.

"Kid says hundred and fifty miles and swing 'em a bit to the east?"

The piercing blue eyes stared down at the overalled figure still leaning over the top strand. "How the hell do you know?"

"I reckon I've been there," Jude said calmly.

The twogun rider broke into a soft laugh, and then finished, grinning. "Hunkered you, Shelby! He sure hunkered you that time."

The trail boss saw no humor in the situation. He stared coldly at Jude again, then abruptly wheeled his horse and gigged in the spurs. Something in his manner indicated that he expected the other rider to follow, but the black-haired man called Blackie didn't. Something in *his* manner said that here was a man who kow-towed to no man and wasn't afraid of the very devil himself.

"That's Nute Shelby. Trail boss," he said. He had lifted a leg and had been sitting with it curled around the saddle horn. Now he lowered it, found the stirrup with a worn boot toe, preparatory to taking leave. He looked down again, past Jude's shoulder, to where the silver dollar stood on its edge, half buried in the dirt.

"Pick up the dollar, kid," he said.

"You pick it up," Jude said. "I told you I got plenty at the house."

The rider laughed, and at that moment there came a new sound in the rustle of the corn back of Jude. His father had sneaked upon him again.

CHAPTER II

THE elder Gordon was in his mid-fifties and a powerfully built man. He had the solid bone of the soil worker with big knarled hands, and in one of those hands he carried a twenty foot length of coiled blacksnake whip of shiny plaited leather with an eighteen inch hickory stock. He was dark, not quite so dark as the rider of the claybank, but his skin was surprisingly light, covered now with a short stubble of pepper shot whiskers. Jude's mother had been auburn haired and even freckled, and it was from her that he had inherited his own reddish hair and the mass of freckles. In moments of drunken frenzy John Gordon had, many times roared at her that the damned brat couldn't have been his because it didn't look like her. She'd probably gone out and had a very good time with some no-account city slicker in the town in Missouri where Jude had been born.

It was easy to see that the older man had been drinking heavily. Jude knew he had been running off a batch of stuff in the barn still this afternoon, which also accounted for the prosperity of the Gordon farm. John Gordon's neighbors for miles around beat a path to his door to buy the corn whiskey that came from the still. Gordon was jokingly known as the "corn farmer," and not without good reason. It accounted for that twelve acres now lazing greenly in the afternnon sun. Not much of that grain ever would find its way into the bowels of horses and hogs on the Gordon farm. It was *still* corn.

"You, Jude!" he roared. "What the bloody hell you mean standing there talking to that no-account saddle bum? Git at that plow and git it goin'. I'll have no lazy son of mine idlin' away his time talking to every thievin' cowman that comes along." And to the rider, his arm outstretched, coiled whip in hand. "Git! You git!"

The twogun rider obviously was amused. He looked at the whiskey flushed face and grinned. "Who's he, kid? Your old man?"

"My pa," Jude nodded, turning aside and moving to the plow handles.

"Looks to me like 'Pa' has done loaded himself up on panther juice and gone on the rampage. Son, you better do what he says. He looks terribly mad. Plumb riled up."

"Git!" Jude's father repeated fiercely. "If you think I'm afraid of them two pistols you're packin', I ain't."

"Most gents loaded to the tonsils with

raw moonshine liquor generally ain't," observed the smiling rider. And to Jude: "Thanks for the tobacco, son. For the past week I've been smoking everything from ragweed to the bark off mesquite trees. Better get on the plow handles or he might take the hide off you."

"You bet I'll take the hide off him." the elder Gordon said. "Minute he gits to the house I'm goin' to teach him to waste time out here when there's work to be done. I'll do it right now!"

HE SNAPPED the length of the whip out full and his arm went back. Jude unconsciously hunched his shoulders for the hide cutting slash that was to come. But it didn't come. He turned for a look at his father. The half upraised arm was slowly lowering the stock of the deadly blacksnake to the elder Gordon's side; and for a very good reason.

He was looking squarely down the muzzle of a heavy .45 caliber pistol, held low at the rider's right hip, half across the saddle.

"Just go ahead and do it, mister," came in a soft voice not at all in keeping with the rider's wild appearance. "I wouldn't make an orphan outa the kid, even though I'd be doing him a favor; but I'll fix up that arm and shoulder to where you'll have to learn how to work left handed. Give me the whip, mister."

"It's my whip . . . Blackie," Jude said, using the word hesitatingly and feeling a strange flush come to his face at such familiarity.

The rider sheathed the big pistol at his hip. "All right, son. It's your funeral. But if he uses that killer whip on you when it ain't even right to use on a hoss I'll just naturally come back here and give him a taste of it myself."

"It's all right. I can handle him . . . I guess," Jude said. "And much obliged. I'm obliged to you."

Blackie said, "That's all right, son," and watched as the broad back of the elder Gordon disappeared, striding angrily, into the green forest of the tall corn. "How old are you, kid?"

"Eighteen," Jude said.

"The hell! I figured you for about fifteen. Eighteen, eh? Well, when I was eighteen—and that was ten years ago—I taught my old man some manners with a single tree alongside the head and I haven't been back since. Guess I got to be going. Adios, and good luck."

"So-long," Jude said.

He stood there between the plow handles, unwrapping the lines, his eyes on the broad back of the galloping horseman. So his name was Blackie and he wore two pistols? Jude wondered why. He turned to the team, taking hold of the lines and slipping them over a shoulder.

"You . . . Maud! Pete! Giddup! Gittyup!"

He finished the furrow that afternoon, plowing south for two hundred yards to the corner, turning west along the ends of the rows, then north for a ways, and finally came into the east turn. He stopped the team midway in the field and not more than a hundred yards from the house. He unhooked them from the plow, hanging the trace chain rings over the hames. He always loved to unhook the inside ones, slipping in between the two sweaty, patient rumps and watching as they stepped aside to give him room between them. The sweaty smell of their bay bodies was always good to his senses, for he loved horses. That was about the only thing his father ever saw good in him: he had a way with horses.

"You, Maud, you old devil," he murmured and ran a hand over her big, velvety soft nose.

He coiled the lines on the hames, separating them, and went toward the wire gate. They obediently followed. He opened and let them go through, and while he closed the gate they shambled toward the harness shed. From another sod building a short distance away smoke, blue against the sky, curled and floated lazily upward. His father was running off the last of the batch. Jude unharnessed and went to the house. It was still pretty early; early, that is, for him to quit the field. Normally he would have made another round. But the herd and the meeting with the riders, plus his father's appearance, had set strange emotions stirring within him. They had been there before, the last weeks past now. He had felt them innerly, tugging at him, and the tugging had developed into a restlessness he could understand and yet couldn't understand. His life belonged here on this farm, on these plowed up prairies, among people of his own kind. His father was a

farmer and expected him to become a farmer. The world was a far distant place peopled by strangers in dim and distant states of which he and his father and the neighbors around them were only vaguely aware.

Jude washed up at the bench inside the door and automatically began getting supper. His father would be in pretty soon, and his father always ate like a hog at a trough after imbibing an overload of whiskey. Somehow Jude didn't feel hungry . . . but there was still supper to cook. He lit the fire in the battered kitchen stove his mother had brought all the way from Missouri those many years ago and then looked into the oven. Some corn bread left over from dinner, a pot of beans sprinkled with chili he'd bought on the last long trip to Abilene. A couple of big steaks off the trail herd steer's haunch out in the smoke house, topped off by molasses, ought to suffice.

FOOTSTEPS sounded beyond the open kitchen door of the three room shack and his father paused, resting a hand on the doorway to steady himself.

"I'm goin' to beat the holy hell out of you," he said thickly. "Talkin' to them cow punchers and lettin' the weeds grow, eh? Stood right there while his own father had a pistol pulled on him. His own father! Your mother was no damned good but I'll make a good man out of you if I have to beat you to death."

Jude had backed away into a corner. The old fear was upon him again, but for the first time he looked down in his hand and discovered that it contained a heavy skillet. This thing had happened so many times in the past since the year his mother had been dead. That past year had been one of plain hell. Up until then John Gordon had taken out much of his drunken rages upon her, because of one of those freaks of nature that happen quite often in the life work of a doctor.

Jude had been born a "blue baby." He had been almost black at birth, a fact that had sent his father storming and roaring into a big drunk and then coming home an hour later, with a borrowed shotgun, to kill his wife and the hours old son.

"A damn blue!" he had yelled. "My own wife delivering up to me a damn blue baby!" He had almost screamed the words, and only the fact that a rugged small town doctor had first knocked him down and then shaken him to sensibility, while explaining a common occurence, had saved the lives of Jude and his mother. Later, when Jude had changed color and took on his mother's nature, it was a "city slicker" who had been the adulterer.

Jude had always felt deep down inside him that his father knew these were untruths. His father knew that the woman he had married had been loyal, patient, and completely chaste. But a man had to have some reason for letting off steam in his drunken rages, and these things John Gordon had found good excuses.

It might have been the strange stirrings within Jude these past weeks. It might have been one of a thousand references to his mother's character. All he knew now was that he had the skillet in his right hand, a heavy, cast iron thing encrusted a coal black from many years on the stove, and he lifted it slowly.

"You ain't going to whip me now or no more, Pap," he said. "I've taken my last licking off you, understand?"

"I understand, all right, you young whelp! Defy me, will you? Defy me as the Israelites defied their God after they came out of Egypt. I'll put on you the same punishment that He put on them. I'll put the fear of the Lord God Almighty into you as He did His wayward children. Where's that blacksnake? I'm going to take the hide off you."

He staggered toward the bedroom door and Jude, trembling with fear and anger, watched him go. He stood with the skillet in his hand. *I'm going to kill my father,* something inside his brain said. *I'm going to kill my father.*

The elder Gordon was fumbling around in the other room, stumbling and cursing. Presently there came a half muffled crash of the bed. Jude, the skillet in his hands, tip-toed to the door and looked in. His father was laying half across the bed and he was already snoring.

Something like a sigh went out of Jude Gordon's young lungs. Slowly he lowered the half ready skillet. His glance went from his father on the bed to the old Sharps Buffalo gun standing in a corner near his own bed. It was a 45—110—550. That meant a .45 caliber, 110 grains of black

powder, and a 550 grain slug of lead. He had killed his first and only buffalo with that gun at the age of eleven, having to rest the huge, crow-bar-like barrel over a bank because he wasn't big enough nor strong enough to hold it up. The kick of it almost had torn off his shoulder. Later he had got to where he could fire it pretty good, leaning forward a bit and holding the stock tight against his shoulder. That way it didn't hurt him so much, particularly when he stuffed one of his mother's towels down under his shirt as padding.

JUDE went to his bed and put a knee on it, reaching up on a shelf he had built on the wall to keep his prized possessions. They weren't many. Eight or nine sacks of tobacco with papers, a few greenish colored .50 caliber Sharps shells he'd picked up on the prairie—memento of the Buffalo hunters—several rattles of snakes he'd killed, including one with thirteen rattles or "rings" as he called them, a pocket knife with two broken blades, and a small rusty saw that one of the neighbors said was used to dehorn cattle. His books, or rather the books his mother had left him, were in a case along the wall, with a picture of her on top.

He took down the tobacco and the rattle with the thirteen "rings." You were supposed to handle the rattles very carefully because somebody had told him that they had a certain kind of dust on them and it would get on your hands and then into your eyes when you rubbed them and make you blind. Jude always had washed his hands after handling the rattlesnake rattles. He had been very careful about this. It was almost a ritual. A man had only one pair of eyes and he didn't want to lose his sight just because he had been careless in handling a pair of rattlesnake rattles.

He went to the book case. There were so many he wanted to take, but it was one hundred and fifty miles to Abilene and a man had to travel light when he was on foot. He chose two and placed them on the bed beside the tobacco sacks and the snake rattles. He picked up his mother's picture and put it with them. Then he took the skillet and went back into the kitchen, dropping it onto the top of the stove whose fire was still burning, now down to a bed of coals. He'd let the beans and cornbread stay in the oven. They would be hot when his father slept it off, and woke up hungry.

He made his way to the barn to get a gunnysack. Maud and Pete had finished their supper and were ambling around the lot, seeking a good place to stop and doze from the day's plowing. Jude found the sack, went over and rubbed each of them on the nose, and stood there looking about him. The sun was getting pretty low on the western horizon, losing its heat strength as it pushed downward, and the corn tassels were silent in the evening as though, like Maud and Pete, seeking rest. Jude nuzzled Maud's patient muzzle again.

"So-long, old girl," he murmured. "I hope Pa don't get drunk and beat you. If he does, kick hell out of him."

It didn't take long to pack his belongings. His mother's picture he carefully wrapped in a prized new shirt. He went into the bedroom again, after returning to the kitchen with the weighted sack. He had forgotten something. His eyes roved around the room until they caught sight of the hickory stock of the blacksnake whip beneath the edge of the bed. He brought it out, carefully coiled it, and put it in the sack. There was a pencil and paper on his mother's writing desk and he sat down.

He wrote swiftly in a clear unawkward hand:

Pa,
I'm going away to Abilene,
Jude.

That was all. He placed the sheet of foolscap on the bed where his father would be sure to see it when he came out of his stupor. The elder Gordon lay on his back now. He had twisted around somehow and got straightened out on the bed. He lay with his mouth open, the lips dried and cracked, and even in drunken sleep he kept smacking them. Jude knew that the liquor had sucked up all the liquid out of his system and that it was demanding water; more water. Glasses and glasses of water. So he'd better get out. His father would be waking most any time now and be staggering to the water pail. Jude made one more trip out back, returned and presently set off across the prairie, the weighted sack over one shoulder. Once, a half mile distant, he looked back. He turned for a moment and, in the yellow, cool glow of the late evening sun, stared at the shack. It had been his home for most of his life; at least that part of his

life when memory had been clear and coherent.

Maybe, he thought, *I'll come back some day.*

He turned and resolutely set off on foot again.

The sun was almost down now and beyond the rim of the western and southern horizons the sky was beginning to turn blue; a cold and ominous blue. He knew what that meant; he had lived on the prairies too long. Unless he missed his guess there was going to be one hell of a rain storm sometime between darkness and dawn. He increased his pace from about two and a half miles an hour to three, making a mental note that perhaps he should have brought along a quilt or blanket. He hadn't figured that he'd need them, because the nights were warm and the added weight would be a burden. Well, let it rain, if it would. He had never heard of any man dying from a summer rainstorm and he would weather it through. But he increased his pace.

HE HAD wanted to bring along the old Sharps, for though the gun actually belonged to his father, it had been understood that the weapon was Jude's, since the elder Gordon hadn't fired it in years. No matter. Coyotes were too cowardly to attack a man at night, and he could chase away inquisitive skunks with a stick. He had matches and some food taken from the meat house and he would get along. Let it rain.

Darkness set in.

He strode on, taking the long, steady steps of a farmer. He didn't feel tired. After all why should a man get tired working around the place during the morning, plowing furrows in the afternoon, and then quitting at least an hour early? It had been an easy day. He didn't realize then just how much strength and endurance was in his young body, hardened by years on the farm of his father. He would make the willows along Gramma Creek, cut a few with a knife, and build himself a shelter. He had matches and he had food to be cooked—he was getting hungry now—and he would make out all right.

He glanced at the darkened sky again; not worriedly but just taking precautions. Nothing to worry about so far. Maybe it wouldn't rain after all. Half the neighbors who came to the farm to buy moonshine corn whiskey prided themselves on being weather experts. There was one old man—Dad Summers—who claimed that the bullet from a (damned) Union sharpshooter still lodged in his leg could tell him when it would rain, snow, sleet, hail, and predict what kind of crops they would all have next year. Jude wasn't sure that the old man was always right. He was, on second thought, pretty certain that garrulous Dad was just a talkative old man who wanted to impress people and didn't know a darned thing about the weather. Bullet in his leg. Huh! You could tell by the clouds or the color of the sky. One of the roving Indian bands—a squaw—had said a coyote told her what the weather would be for the next week. He had asked another, a wrinkled old harridan who came begging for food. She had said she could look at the willows at sundown and tell.

Pah!

He strode on . . . but he still knew the color of that sky and he still didn't like it. Some instinct told him that it was going to rain like hell. All right, let it pour. Jude strode on in the gathering darkness, lengthening his stride still more. He wasn't afraid of the rain. He was hungry and wanted to make the creek as soon as possible in order to fix something to eat. He glanced at the now night sky again and noted that it had a dark rim around the horizon but no clouds. Just that dark rim.

He covered three miles and then topped a ridge. Here he paused for a moment to ease the gunnysack to the other shoulder . . . and to look back once more. But the ridges of the undulating prairie, and the night, had swallowed up all that he had left behind. He drew in a deep breath of the night air, turned his young face resolutely to the north, and set out again. After a time he dropped down a long, scarcely definable slope, and saw in the darkness the waters of the creek ahead. From in the distance, to his right, came the low, uneasy bawl of cattle and he instinctively pushed his course a bit to the left. Most of his life had been spent in the semi-solitude of the farm, and he unconsciously avoided people. On the streets of Abilene he had been self conscious, filled with the feeling that all the eyes on the street were upon him; probing him, boring through him, jeering at him for being a mere farm boy from the outlands; and quite unaware that

they had given him scarcely a passing glance, not to speak of a passing thought.

He swerved away further to the west.

He was three hundred yards from the creek when there came the sound of hoofs in the darkness and a man's voice called out sharply, "Speak up, Mister. Who is it?"

Jude wanted to call out an answer, to give his name. But his tongue froze in his throat and he couldn't speak. He stood, rigid in the darkness.

"Throw up your hands," came the command. "Get 'em up or I'll blow you to Kingdom Come."

JUDE raised his hands as high as he could, the weight of the loaded gunnysack sending little streams of pain along his left arm. The rider came nearer. Jude saw then the pistol in the right hand of the man in the saddle. He rode closer, peered down, and then suddenly he was laughing softly in the night.

"Hello, nester," Blackie said, sheathing that ominous big pistol at his right thigh. "Well, I'll be damned," came chuckling softly through the night. "Kid, you had me nervous for a moment. Didn't know who you were. Where the devil are you going this time of night, out on the prairie?"

Jude lowered his hands and placed the gunnysack on the ground. "Abilene," he said.

He was shaking a little bit, the shock of frozen fear not yet passed. The rider rode closer. He was on a black horse now.

"Abilene? What in the devil are you going to do there?"

"I don't know," Jude confessed, honestly. "But I'm going to Abilene," he added stubbornly.

The rider in the night gave off with that soft laugh of his. It was the friendly laugh Jude recognized. He swung down, holding the reins in his left hand.

"So you had it out with the old gent full of booze and carrying the bull whip? Good boy. But . . . hell, kid, you can't walk one hundred and fifty miles across these prairies all by yourself. What's got into you anyhow? Don't you know the coyotes will get you?"

"I ain't afraid of the coyotes," Jude said. "I've lived here too long. And I'll get to Abilene."

The twogun rider chuckled softly in the night, the sound sending a warm something into Jude's soul. "I know you will. I knew you were a spunky little cuss the minute I laid eyes on you. But . . . hell, kid, it's one hundred and fifty miles."

"I know," Jude said. "I've been there."

"What's it like?"

Blackie was rolling a cigarette—a quirly from the same sack Jude had given him that afternoon. Jude said, "It's a big town. Lots of people there.

"Very good description. A very good, or big town. Lots of people there. That's what they said about Kansas City, Chicago, New York . . . the first time I went there. Lots of people. This is damned good tobacco—what did you say your name was?"

"Jude?"

"Jude. Good name. And this is still good tobacco. I'm selfish, Jude. I hid it from the boys. Wouldn't dare roll a smoke when I rode in to camp for a change to a night horse. I got first trick tonight. Where you going now?"

"Down here by the creek to make a fire and cook some supper?"

The cigarette tip was glowing brightly in the darkness. It lit up Blackie's handsome face and even the long shaggy locks of his uncut hair. He pulled hard and the bright red tip described a glowing arc through the darkness as his hand dropped down to his side, near one of the guns at his hips. His exhalation of satisfaction came clearly to Jude's keen ears.

Blackie put the cigarette to his lips again. "You'll do no such thing," he said. "You're coming to camp with me. I'll be relieved pretty soon and we'll go in and get supper. Come on, Jude. Get up back of me. Don't know whether this ornery broomtail will carry double or not but it's a good time for him to learn."

"I can walk it," Jude said stubbornly. "You don't have to worry about the dollar."

"What dollar?"

"For the tobacco. I got it in my pocket. I picked it up out of the dirt. I want to give it back to you."

Blackie had mounted. The glowing cigarette arced to the ground, a flick of thumb and finger, and Blackie's voice said, "You're okay, Jude. You got the stuff. Keep the cartwheel. Try your luck with it on the roulette wheel in Abilene. What's that you've got with you?"

"Just a few things."

"Hand 'em up. I'll tie them to the saddle horn. Then get up back of me. Ever ride a horse that might try to buck?"

"I rode a few young work horses . . . bareback," Jude said. "Just breaking them in. A man gets tired in the field when he has to plow all day and then follow a team in. Better to break them to ride and let them carry you in."

"Lot different from a knot head cow pony. Holy smokes"—as the gunnysack was handed up. "It's heavy."

"Just a few things. I wouldn't want to be obliged to you."

"No obligations at all, Jude. I'm not forgetting the smokings. Here," extending a hand down through the darkness. "Now the fun starts."

He had disengaged a left boot from the stirrup. He held the head of the suspicious cow pony up high as Jude extended a long leg and got an uncertain hold in the stirrup. A strong hand came down, caught Jude's right one, and hoisted him up back of the cantle.

"Hang onto my waist and don't grip your feet in his flanks," Blackie warned. "Here we go."

THEY went. The cow pony, all of its indignation outraged, fought to get its head down so that it could buck. This was something new. It was bad enough that these riders mounted it in the morning, jeeringly allowed it to buck and work off steam, and then rode the daylights out of it during the day. This was something that a hard working cow pony could understand. But to have *two* riders aboard it! There was a limit to such things; a good hard working cow horse had its pride.

Jude clamped both arms about Blackie's waist and hung on, keeping his feet well forward, out of the animal's sensitive flanks. That much he knew. No man wanted another man to tickle him in the ribs. The spot there was sensitive, and it was an insult to a man's dignity to have somebody shoving their fingers playfully under a man's armpits. Jude knew just how that indignant pony felt. He didn't need the darkness to tell him that its ears were flattened with, or in, indignation and that all of its senses had been outraged.

He clamped hard with his legs along its forward ribs, just back of Blackie's chapped legs, hung onto Blackie's lean, hard muscled waist, and hoped for the best. Presently the pitching stopped. Blackie's laugh came back.

"He's plumb mad, Jude, and I guess I don't blame him a whole lot. Cow ponies have a code, the same as men. When you go beyond the code they get plenty sore about it. But he'll just have to put up with it for a little while, and I promise this crowbait he won't ever have to do it again. But I got to get you to camp. How're you making out?"

Jude hadn't made out too well. Despite his efforts to clamp the cow pony's ribs and hanging on to Blackie's waist he had bounced up and down several times, and now there was a sharp, biting pain in his groin where the cantle had struck it. He hung on grimly, gritting his teeth. The pony finally had given it up as a bad job and settled down to a plodding walk.

"All right," Jude said between clenched teeth. "Did you lose my belongings?"

"They rattled around somewhat but they're safe. I'll circle the herd. About time I got relieved."

They rode on, at a walk now, and Blackie began to hum. Jude, sitting back of him, holding on to the concha straps of the saddle now, could see the dark outlines of the bedded down herd not more than a quarter of a mile from Gramma Creek. Blackie's humming soon broke into words:

Beat the drum slowly,
And play the fife lowly,
Play the dead march as you sing me a song . . .

He coughed and Jude, his eyes on the dark outlines of the bedded down cattle again, said, "Why don't you put them across the creek?"

"Huh? Well, why?"

"The NP herd bedded down on the other side when they camped."

"Tell Shelby that. Nute would be happy to know it. If the NP bedded down over there then Nute would be happy to know that *we* bedded down over here."

"It's going to rain tonight, Blackie," Jude said.

"All right. It's going to rain tonight. We had a lot of rains coming up from Texas."

"But these creeks fill up and come down. If it rains you'll have a rising in no time. You shoulda bedded down on the other side."

"A weather prophet," Blackie said softly. "I'll tell Nute all about it. Maybe he'll roust out the herd and push 'em across tonight because you say it's going to rain tonight and the creek is coming down."

"It'll come down fast. It always does when it rains," Jude said, and somehow felt like a fool. Old man Summers and his bullet laden leg!

He sure felt like a fool and, then, clamped his lips tightly to put down his humiliation.

He should have kept his mouth shut.

CHAPTER III

FROM somewhere off in the night came the sound of soft singing, a mournful song of life and lost love on the range. Blackie rode toward it and presently a rider loomed up, clear against the night bowl of the sky. He pulled up short.

"My goodness, Blackie!" he exclaimed. "How fat you've got."

"Friend of mine behind me," Blackie's voice said. "How's the herd?"

"Quiet as a mouse. No trouble . . . thanks to the All High one. No more worry about stampedes from the NP outfit. Where'd you pick up the passenger? In the stage coach business now?"

"Half a cent a mile. We give special service. Shut up! You talk too much anyhow. Baggage at no extra expense. He says it's going to rain."

"He *does?*" There was mockery in the tones. "Well, goodness gracious me . . . oh, my great aunt Emma's left foot. I should have bought a new slicker instead of this leaky one I've used for five years. So it's going to rain? Look at the stars That fool teacher of mine in school used to make us study the stars. He said that the ones we were looking at might have been out for a million years and what we were seeing was just the glow of it as it went out. Tell the cook that when he blows out his lantern. It's going to rain. And me without a bath these last six months. Brrrrrrrr," and the mocking rider shook himself. "I always hated baths."

Blackie's voice said, over his shoulder, "Don't mind him, Jude. His name is Mike Kessler. He reads a lot of books but none of them seem to show him how to win at bunkhouse poker. He's a poet at heart. That don't seem to help him either. You really think it's going to rain?"

"Yes," Jude Gordon said. "A real down pour, Blackie."

"The passenger-weather prophet," Mike's voice said out of the darkness. "I tell you there is no accounting for the occult. I *knew* I should have got myself a new slicker and a weatherproof tarp for my bedroll. That old one of mine leaks like a sieve. You oughta hear the cook squall when I try to crowd the old bull out from in under the chuckwagon. Well, run along, children. I must be away to my dee-uties."

Blackie gigged the black into motion and presently Mike was lost in the night. Jude could almost sense the grin in Blackie's face.

"Mike," his voice finally came back over his shoulder, "is the scholar of the outfit. He can quote Shakespeare, poetry by the mile, and he's the biggest practical joker in the whole outfit. Watch out for him, Jude."

"I'll watch out for him," Jude said.

They continued their circle of the herd along the south edge, working eastward, and finally turned north. It was, Jude thought, just like following a plow furrow along a field. Presently the light of a fire twinkled through the darkness, grew, became outlined back of what was a staked out horse corral, and then outlined reclining figures around a big fire. They rode up to the horse corral where Jude slid down. Blackie descended with a long single step, and Jude saw then how the *remuda* corral was constructed. Stakes driven deep into the ground and a long line of ropes around it to keep the night horses in.

"This is the remuda corral, Jude," Blackie said. "We keep the night horses in here. Some horses just naturally are more sure footed than others, and we use them for riding night herd. That's what you see in there."

"Where are the others?" Jude asked.

"The night wrangler has them out, grazing. He'll bring them in about daylight, put them in the corral, eat breakfast, then turn in under a tree for the day to get his sleep in. When he wakes up he'll straddle his hoss and burn the breeze to catch up with the outfit, following the trail made by the cattle."

He unloosed Jude's gunnysack from the

saddle horn and handed it down. "You got a lot of stuff there, Jude," he said. "Seems kind of heavy."

"Yes," Jude said. "I got a lot of stuff."

He stood and waited while Blackie unsaddled and turned the horse loose. Most times you put the animal into the remuda corral, trusting that no night rider, riding herd, would be fool enough to pick a horse he *thought* was out of another man's string. Every rider knew his own string. But if the horse could be trusted to stick close by and graze, and then join the remuda when it was being driven in by the night wrangler, it could be turned loose. Blackie turned loose the black night horse and it promptly blew, slobbered, and then made for the creek cutting a silvery stream through the night three hundred yards north of them. It was thirsty. Afterward it would graze near camp. When the bell on the lead mare's neck tinkled at daylight, announcing that the night wrangler was bringing in the remuda, the black would join them.

Blackie dumped his saddle over the top rope of the remuda corral. "When you spend your hard earned money for a saddle you don't handle it careless like," he explained. "A saddle is something like a horse—you get to know it personal. You get the feel of it. You buy a new saddle, now, and you don't know how it's going to set. You're not used to it. You got to *get* used to it. Same way with a new puncher in an outfit. All the old hands have the best horses. They know them and what they can do. You'll see punchers riding up to the boss, when an outfit first starts out. It's up to him to allot the strings. Old hands always get the best horses, though the boss tries to be fair. A man can't do a good job of punching cows unless he's mounted as well as the next gent. But you'll find as much difference in men as you do in horses. Take me, for instance. I don't sleep or sit on my saddle like the other boys do. I don't believe in it. So you're going to Abilene and don't know what you're going to do? All right, that's fair enough. No more questions. Don't *you* ask any either. It's not good cow camp manners and sometimes it's not healthy."

JUDE knew that the older man was showing his appreciation for the tobacco and was trying to save him embarrassment when they approached the fire. And Jude was embarrassed; almost frightened. He knew that he must run a gauntlet of curious eyes and his heart began pounding all the harder as they came to the fire. He saw about a dozen men lounging around—he wasn't just sure how many because his stomach was all tight inside. He wished that he had gone on. He'd stick around the fire for a few minutes and then, somehow, manage to get away.

In that moment as a dozen sharp glances focused themselves upon him he would have given all his prized possessions, except his mother's picture, to be back on the farm or away somewhere else.

They came up to the fire and Blackie said, "Fine bunch of loafers."

"What's that you got with you—a stray maverick?" queried one, a buck-toothed, rather heavily built youth of about twenty-one, raising up on an elbow.

"That'll do for you, Grady," Blackie replied easily. "Just go back to your marbles and mumbly-peg games and you'll be all right."

That one brought a ripple of grins around the fire. Jude didn't know anything about trail drives or trail crews; but he had heard the farmers talk about some men having been up the trail two or three times on the hard drives and many made their *first* trip. His impression of the buck-toothed Grady was that this was his first trip and that he considered himself a full grown veteran. Jude didn't like Grady at sight.

"Well," drawled the buck-toothed puncher, "I notice that he ain't wearin' no brand an' his ears ain't notched, but I reckon we can rope him in the mornin' and fix that up and then turn him loose with the herd. He'll soon git trail broke."

Jude had put down the sack, his face flaming at the laughter. He felt all sick inside and some kind of a panic seized him. He picked up the sack in a sudden swift motion, flung it over a shoulder, but his bolt for freedom was stopped short by a powerful but friendly hand on his shoulder.

"Easy, Jude," Blackie's calm voice said, "I told you that some punchers are different than others—including talking too much. Grady's just a loud mouth who don't mean any harm. Come on back here

and let's you and me eat supper. And if Grady opens his mouth again I'll push his boot in it, spur and all."

Jude came back, his face redder than ever all the hunger for supper having fled. He was too upset and uneasy at the strange position he found himself in; a "maverick." Grady was pretty much right after all, he thought. He was a stray.

A small, wiry built man wearing an apron was at the chuckboard in back of the huge chuckwagon. He had set out two plates with knives and forks. He wore boots, a weatherbeaten brown hat with a brim smaller than those of the other men, and he had the scraggliest mustache Jude ever had seen. It seemed to fall all over the area of his mouth. His nose was not long but stuck out in a kind of knob, as Jude described it to himself, and the knob was just a little on the red side. Jude had an idea that when the herd arrived in Abilene the cook would spend most of the time there in a drunken stupor.

"Come and git it," he said gruffly to Blackie. "I ain't got all night."

Jude and Blackie picked up the plates, Jude deliberately taking his plate last. He was going to watch Blackie and do what he did. He felt a close affinity to this man who had prevented his father from using the blacksnake bull whip on him that afternoon, and he somehow knew that Blackie held a special place all his own among the crew. Maybe it was because he wore two pistols instead of one; but Jude noticed that Grady had subsided. He lay back against his saddle, looking at Jude and grinning in such a manner as to make him feel uncomfortable. It was deliberate hoo-rawing and Jude disliked him all the more.

Blackie took the plate and went to the fire. Jude trailed him. He watched as the older man took beans, a big thick steak, and canned corn from the pots, after first pouring his tin cup full of coffee from the big black pot. He poured for Jude too and then went over to a vacant place near Jude's belongings and sat down, cross legged. He put the plate on his lap and began to eat. Jude did likewise, and with the first bite his hunger returned, gnawing at him as hunger never before had gnawed. For more than a year, since his mother's death, he had eaten his own cooking, except for the last trip to Abilene that spring. Now the food had been prepared differently and by a man who apparently knew his business.

JUDE fought down his desire to eat faster and paced his bites with the big rider beside him. Conversation had picked up around the fire again. Nute Shelby sat with his back against the rear wheel of the wagon, on a goods box, special consideration to the man who was leading the outfit. He took little part in the general conversation unless directly spoken to; a sour visaged, taciturn, hard man with a tremendous responsibility on his hands who gave back answers in curt monosyllables.

Far in the distance the lowing of the bedded down herd made background sounds for the conversation.

"So the NP is ahead of us, eh, Nute?" a middle aged-man with a bad bullet scar on the left cheek asked. Kessler, the poet and joker of the outfit, had named him "Cicatrix" because of the scar, and it had been shortened to plain Cic.

"That's what the kid said," grunted the trail boss.

"What kid?"

"That one," with a sharp incline of the head toward Jude.

Again those critical eyes, a whole ring of them swung to Jude, and he almost choked on his food. He lowered his head above his plate and said nothing.

"You say they passed us day before yesterday, kid?" Cic asked pointedly.

"Yes," Jude said.

"Run over your crops?" Jude's clothes and mein proclaimed him a farmer. He couldn't have been anything else.

"No."

"He's sure a talkative cuss for a kid," Grady simply had to put in.

Blackie's head turned a trifle and his voice was a little cold as he looked at the buck-toothed puncher. "You shut up," he said in a matter-of-fact voice that had lost all tone. "Can't you see the kid's scared and uncomfortable? You open that mouth of yours at him once more tonight and I'm going to shut it."

"None of that," Nute Shelby said, just as tonelessly.

"There'll be that and plenty more if Grady don't lay off this kid. And he's not as young as he looks. He's eighteen. If it hadn't been for him we'd a missed Abilene

by ten or fifteen miles. Now you shut up, Grady."

"Well," defended Grady in a somewhat mollified tone, or trying to make it sound so to regain lost prestige, "all I said was that he's a talkative cuss."

"He's got to make up for the too much talking that you do."

Grady affected a bored yawn, still trying to hold his "prestige." "I'd give a dollar for a good sack of tobacco right now," he announced.

Blackie put his empty plate aside and reached into a pocket of the torn shirt. The sack and papers went sailing through the air, landing near the buck-toothed puncher's booted feet. "Pay me," Blackie said.

Grady stared. "Where'd you git it?" he asked obviously taken back.

"Pay me," Blackie said.

"I—uh—"

Jeers rose in chorus. Grady, red-faced, reached into his pants pocket and brought out a silver dollar and, affecting nonchalance, tossed it through the light from the fire. It slapped into Blackie's palm and the two gunman turned to Jude, smiling. He handed it over. "Jude," he smiled, "I had an idea you'd make a pretty good cow puncher, given time; but now I change my mind. You're going to become a merchant. Any man who can sell a sack of five cent tobacco for two dollars ain't got any business poking cows up a loading chute. Here, Jude, take it."

"I already got a dollar you gave me and I don't need it. It's enough," Jude finished, feeling his face get red again.

Blackie forced the coin into his hand. The other men were listening . . . and still grinning over Grady's discomfiture. Blackie made it worse by saying, "This kid gave me a sack of tobacco this evening when I'd have given a dollar myself—without squirming like Grady's doing—and then wouldn't pick it up after I tossed it to him. Now he's got another. Jude, you're all right."

"Hell, Grady," spoke up another tobacco hungry puncher, "ain't you going to give a man a smoke?"

Jude found courage to speak up then. He felt his voice high and off-key as he said, "He don't have to. I got some more."

He hurriedly put aside his empty plate —he was still hungry—and reached behind him to fumble in the gunnysack. He brought out not eight or nine but thirteen sacks of tobacco with papers. He had had more than he thought. He shyly handed them to Blackie and expectant grins broke out.

"This kid's all right," Blackie said, tossing sacks here and there. "And don't let me hear anybody calling him a kid anymore. His name's Jude and that's what it's going to be. I hear one of you gents calling him a kid and I'll just naturally tangle with you. He's eighteen and that's man age in this country. Savvy?"

ONE of the punchers, opening his free sack looked at Grady; and all of a sudden he burst out laughing. The laughter was contagious. It grew in volume, swelled higher into roars of laughter, and even the brittle-faced Nute Shelby was grinning. Grady was a decidedly uncomfortable young man at the moment.

"Hee-Hee-Hee," giggled Cic. "He pays a dollar for a sack of the makin's and then this nester passes 'em around *free*. Oh, haw-haw-haw!"

Grady had to make a comeback somehow and he did it. He grinned in the face of the laughter, though back of the grin Jude saw cold anger and fury at what he innocently had done. He felt almost as bad about it as Grady.

"Well, anyhow," the buck-toothed young puncher said, "as long as I've been without smokes it was worth it. But when I get to Abilene I'm sure going to drink me up a lot of whiskey. Ain't had a drink in nearly a month now and muh tongue is as dry as a dried cow——. I'd give five dollars for a good drink of whiskey right now."

Jude innocently took the bait. He disliked Grady but he didn't wish to make an enemy of him. He merely felt that the tobacco might help to pay for the meal. He had no way of knowing that cow country custom and courtesy demanded that any man, tramp or millionaire, was always welcome to a couple of meals at any chuckwagon with no questions asked. You were hungry and there was plenty of food. Any trail boss or cook who refused a hungry man a meal automatically was classified as a cheap skunk. Punchers lost respect for an outfit that was stingy with its meals, and some of them—cow punchers

being the most independent men in the world—wouldn't ride for some ranches. It was true that now and then a man ran across such an outfit, but they were few and far between. Any hungry stranger was welcomed at the chuckwagon so long as he didn't ask personal questions, butt into anybody's business, and observed cow country manners. That meant not making a hog of himself when it came to the "dessert" or "sweets" to top off a meal. It might consist of anything from molasses to canned peaches, but it was a delicacy and not too plentiful, and a man, puncher or stranger, was supposed to take his share and no more.

Jude innocently took the bait.

He reached back of him into the sack once more and brought out a one gallon demijohn. "You don't have to do that," he said. "I kinda figgered you fellers might like a little and if I run into you it might come in handy. So I brought along some of Pa's best. Here it is."

Blackie started to say, "So that's why that sack was so heavy—" But he didn't quite make it. For a roar that shook the night went around the fire. Cic got up, looked at Grady, then fell on his face on his saddle, his body shaking with nothing less than pure howls.

"Pay him—pay him!" he bawled. "He hunkered you. He hunkered you! Oh, my poor great grandmother's ghost! Oh, haw-haw-haw!"

Jude sat there, astonishment on his face. He was bewildered and wondered if he had done anything wrong. He had only thought they might want a drink. He wasn't sure just what he ought to do now. He looked at Blackie appealingly. But Blackie was occupied otherwise. His head was bent over his chapped lap and his big shoulders were shaking convulsively. He leaned back and stretched out full length on the ground and his roars of laughter filled the night.

He struggled to a sitting position, wiped the tears from his eyes, and looked at Grady. That young man, could his thoughts have been read, wished at the moment that he was miles away. He grinned sheepishly, almost foolishly, and again Jude caught that hidden threat back of his eyes. He knew he had made an enemy.

"Pay him," Blackie said. "You made your play and the kid backed it up with a royal flush. First he hunkered me, then he got Nute just as bad, now he's got you *twice* . . ." Blackie went off into laughter again.

Grady squirmed uncomfortably and looked at Nute. The trail boss said, curtly, "The kid called your play. Pay him."

"I—uh—ain't got—Cic will you lend me some money? Just till we get to Abilene and get paid off. I'm kinda short, like most of us are, and—"

"Not a danged cent," the scar faced man cut in, still giggling. "You got yoreself into this mess and you sure as the devil can get yoreself out of it.

JUDE mustered up his courage. "He don't have to pay anybody," he said. "It was Pa's likker and I guess I worked hard enough to earn it. I just brought it along in case—"

"He'll pay," Nute Shelby's curt, hard voice cut in. "You get five dollars out of Grady's wages when I pay off in Abilene."

"He don't owe me anything. Him or anybody else. Pa's got plenty of it and I brought it along. Anyhow, I won't get to Abilene for a few days yet."

The embarrassment was upon him again. He rose to his feet. The jug, in Blackie's hands, was tilted. He took one—a very small one, Jude noticed—and passed it on to the next man. It went the rounds of the fire, followed by a trip over to Nute, who curtly shook his head. "Go ahead and drink up, but when Pokey says roll out in the morning, you'd damn well better roll out. Any man who don't will get a rope wrapped around his bedroll and take a trip out across the prairie and one I'll guarantee he won't enjoy. Here, Pokey," to the cook.

Pokey wiped his lips and they gave off a smacking sound. He tilted the jug and long gurgles came from his throat. A man's voice said, "Save some for the night crew, you hawg," and everybody laughed.

Jude was up, and now he picked up his gunnysack with its precious belongings, including the coiled bull whip. "Well, I thank you for the supper," he said, "but I got to be going."

A man raising the demijohn to his lips for a second time, slowly lowered it. "Going where, kid?" he asked, in surprise.

"His name's Jude," Blackie's voice cut in sharply.

"Where you going, Jude?" asked the

man with the poised jug.

"I got to make camp over west of here," Jude explained awkwardly, unsure of himself. "It's going to rain tonight and I got to fix up a shelter in the willows. I'm obliged to you for the supper. I got some meat and stuff in the sack," he finished weakly.

They were staring at him. This country kid's ignorance was beyond belief. This flat land farmer boy didn't know what it was all about. Leave them. After the tobacco and the jug of whiskey!

"Son," a very old looking puncher said in a soft and a very gentle tone of voice, "you just put that sack right down. You're staying here with us. I've got an extra blanket in my soogan and maybe we can scrape up some more among the boys. Blackie says you're going to Abilene. So are we. You stay here."

"I'm much obliged but I wouldn't want to be—" he struggled with the courage to say the word—"beholden to nobody. I got enough meat and such stuff to last me till I get in. And him—" indicating Grady "—he don't owe me nothing."

Blackie's voice broke the silence that followed; a stunned silence. This was a new one on them. This flat lands farmer kid was all right. Blackie's words were directed at Nute Shelby.

"Nute, tomorrow morning you put this kid—you put Jude to work helping Pokey at the wagon. Give him an ax and let him chop down wood so's Peanut can haul it in on his rope." He turned to Jude. "The day wrangler has to help Pokey with the wood supply. You can cut it and Peanut can haul it in, and then you give Pokey a hand around the chuckboard. It's a lot better riding on the wagon than hitting it afoot. This Jude," he said to the others, "was walking a hundred and fifty miles to Abilene because his old man was going to cut him to pieces with a bull whip this afternoon."

Grady's voice, a touch of petulance in it, cut in from across the fire. "How'd you know, Blackie?"

"I threw a gun on him," came the cold reply; and then, for some strange reason, Blackie got up and walked alone into the night.

A STRANGE man. A very strange man, Jude thought. And by now he was almost worshipping the black-haired rider who wore the two guns. He somehow felt that Blackie was different. He was unlike these other men. He spoke in the vernacular of the cow country, and yet, now and then, Jude had caught words and their manner of expression that told him Blackie lived in a world all his own. Jude was puzzled.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm much obliged to you but I'll make out all right. And I expect I better get going down along the creek. I got to build a shelter before the rain sets in."

"Rain?" Grady was looking up at the sky and guffawing. "Look here, farmer, we learned all about rains and lightning and stampedes on this trip north. We got to where we know this prairie weather better than we know cows. It ain't goin' to rain."

The jug was still going around. They had been on the trail long weeks, and even months, these tough, hard bitten, lean riders, and drinks of whiskey had been few and far between. Nute Shelby was looking at Jude.

His penetrating eyes were sharp. "How come you know it's going to rain?" he demanded sharply. And his eyes too, like Grady's scoffing ones, went to the clear, starlit sky.

"I don't," Jude confessed. "I just know it's going to rain. You shoulda put your cattle across the creek before it comes down in a rise."

CHAPTER IV

THE laughter around the fire changed. It was a bit strained and sardonic now. This nester kid was a pretty good farmer kid, giving them tobacco and a jug of whiskey he happened to have brought along, but now he was getting too big for his britches. Maybe they shouldn't have taken the smokes and the corn. They watched Nute Shelby's face.

Blackie came back. Nobody knew what had taken him into the night or why. He had gone off so strangely. He said, "Well, I reckon I'll turn in. Jude, I've got an extra blanket you can have. You can roll up in it under the wagon—that is if you don't mind Pokey's snoring. He sounds like a hog, particularly when he gets on his back. You'll be warm."

"I'll get along all right, I reckon," Jude said.

Blackie went to a bed roll — a better looking one than most of the others—and hauled a blanket from the crisp tarp. That tarp appeared to be the best. Only his chaps, his torn shirt, and his two guns appeared to be worn. He came to the fire, handing the blanket to Jude.

"Roll up under the wagon, Jude," he said. "Lot better than sleeping down in the willows without one, particularly when you say it's going to rain."

"The creek's going to rise," Jude answered, taking the blanket. "Them cattle oughta be across before it—the water, I mean, comes."

Blackie said to Nute, half seriously, "You heard what he said. It's going to rain. I'm damned if I don't half believe it. Maybe we should have put the herd across after all."

Nute was smoking a cigarette, one from a sack Jude had given the crew. "I'm still running this outfit, Blackie," a little coolly. "I knew enough to let em drink their fill and then shove 'em across. But all the other cow outfits ahead of us thought of the same thing. The grass on the other side is all grazed out. The weather is clear and we can cross in the morning."

"All right. We cross in the morning." And to Jude: "Better get some sleep, Jude. On a trail outfit the cook is first up, long before daylight. He'll be rousting you out to help get a fire going."

Jude took the blanket, and the second one handed him by the old puncher, picked up his now lightened gunnysack, and crawled beneath the wagon. The jug was almost empty. Several riders of the crew were pulling off their boots, Jude not knowing that within a matter of short hours some would be called out to take a "trick," when Mike and the others came in. Nute Shelby still sat on the box, his back to the wagon wheel, smoking thoughtfully and staring into the fire, now a glowing bed of coals. Pokey had finished with the dishes, removed his apron, and was getting his bedroll from another wagon some distance away. Grady was rolling into his own tarp. Jude didn't know that Grady would be called out to take the next trick at night riding.

One has to watch the herd. It was bedded down far out on the grassy prairies, a dark mass to the encircling riders, its fears soothed as long as it heard the reassuring, singing voice of the jogging cowboys. Only lightning and thunder and rain could bring it to its feet; trembling, filled with fear, and ready to bolt. But just let some unusual noise—such as a rattling slicker—break in upon their comfort and they would come quickly erect, tails twisting, bellowing and spooky, ready to bolt.

Jude had listened to the farmers talk about stampedes and he hoped this outfit didn't have one during the final leg of the trip.

He spread the quilt, folded it lengthwise, and removed his shoes. He crawled in between the folds, pulled the blanket over him, and then put his shoes on the ground under the quilt to make a makeshift pillow for his head. Pokey came grunting and crawling in, unrolled his bedroll, the reek of the whiskey strong upon his breath.

"Snug as a skunk in a hollow log," he said in an attempt at friendliness. "I'm shore tired. I c'd sleep fer a week."

"How do you wake up mornings?" Jude wanted to know.

Pokey was tugging off his worn boots. "Practice, son. When you've been a cook fer a hungry bunch of grub hounds all of ten years you git used to wakin' up early, no matter how tired you are. Ain't nobody in the world can beller as loud as a damned cow puncher when his grub is five minutes late. Down on the home ranch when we ain't on roundup I got twenty-two hands to rustle grub for. Keeps a man humpin', I can tell ye."

He sighed and settled down inside his bed.

"Where is it?" Jude asked Pokey

"The ranch? Texas. Salt Fork of the Brazos River."

"Whats it like?"

"If ye mean the ranch, it's just another home made bunch of busted down buildings and dugouts with lots of cows and no money. It'll burn you up in summer, freeze yore bones in winter when the northers come blowin' down from across the Oklahoma Territory, and then when it rains ye bog yer freight wagons down to the hubs in red mud so gummy you got to knock it out with a crowbar and put on a' extra team to git in the clear again. We freight nearly eighty miles and it's one hell of a job, I can tell ye."

"That why you became a cook?" Jude asked shyly.

"Yup. I ain't no fool. I quit ridin' six year ago before some damned knot head of a bronk crippled me up fer life. Ye ain't catchin' this old hoss out in the rain and sleet in the middle of the night when I kin be snugged up in the bunkhouse. Not fer Pokey, it ain't. I got sense. Not like that bunch of grub hounds out there," this for the obvious benefit of the others.

"Oh, yas?" came a jeering voice. "Don't let 'im fool you thataway, Jude. Sense, he says he's got. *Huh*!"

Blackie's gentle voice came from his bedroll beyond the now dying fire. "Don't pay any attention to the old goat, Jude. He's just telling you that in the hope you'll work harder around the wagon and make his job easier. Better watch out for him. He's a sly old fox."

POKEY came up on an elbow, bristling at the laughter. "Yah, yah, yah!" he sneered. "Funny fellers, huh? I'm just tryin' to steer him right so's he won't wind up ridin' the grub line as a busted down tramp puncher like some of you hungry loafers do between busy seasons. I got more money saved away from my wages than the hull lot of ye put together."

"Deductin' of course, what you pay for the ten quarts of whiskey you drink every month," came Cic's gibing voice. "Just imagine him retirin' with his 'fortune' to sit on a hotel porch and watch the hard workin' cow punchers come by. Why, you old polecat, you'll be broke in a month after you retire. Just like that." (finger snap.)

"What the hell are *yu* talkin' about?" Pokey roared. "How much money have *yu* got saved up?"

Nute Shelby's hard, curt voice cut in "Better cut out the jawing and get some sleep, boys. You'll need it."

Then the first faint white flash came far to the west, low on the horizon. Lightning.

Jude saw several forms raise up in the darkness, peering. The white flash came again.

"Lightning," Blackie's voice said. "Jude was right. It's going to rain tonight."

"Someplace else," Nute replied. "The sky is clear. No wind. Better get some sleep."

The camp quieted down. Jude lay there, a little tired now, but unable to sleep. He had, abruptly, been thrown into a different world that was strange to him. He was among men he had, up until now, considered as enemies. That was the farmer in him. But he would go on to Abilene with them, earning his keep by helping Pokey with his wagon duties. After that, he didn't know. He thought of his father and remembered the note he had left. He could picture the elder Gordon finding it, reading it, and then going into a rage.

Drowsiness came upon him and the world blotted out. He slept the sound sleep of the young and growing and of the tired.

Rain splatter upon canvas woke him. That and the sound of a man coming out of his bedroll. Nute Shelby. The foreman was up, jerking on his pants, his eyes seeking upward through the blackness of the night sky. It was overcast, heavy hung with clouds. Jude glanced at the horizon. It was black, pitch black, and ominous looking. In the distance the herd was no longer lowing; it was bawling.

The first clap of thunder came, followed by more lightning. The bawl of the herd increased, a volume of sound that rolled toward them, engulfed them, and went on across the creek to fade away into the night; lost on the flat prairie.

"Up!" Shelby's voice called. He was tugging on a boot now. "Roll out. The herd's going to break. Saddle and ride!"

They came out, grumbling and cursing. A man's voice said, "That nester kid was sure as hell right. He said it was going to rain. What he should have said is that it's going to be a regular storm."

To Jude's surprise Pokey was coming out fast, reaching for his boots. Jude had thought they would stay beneath the wagon. He rolled out too.

"There come the cavvy," Pokey grunted. "Shore glad."

Jude could hear them; between fifty and one hundred horses coming in at a trot, the bell of the lead mare jangling plainly. The rain had increased. The big drops poured down, slapping off the canvas of the wagon and the tarp bed rolls and making funny *plupping* sounds in the ashes of the now dead cook fire. The big drops were spattering off the ground, hitting the grassy earth and bouncing into smaller drops that almost were spray.

"Get harnessed up, Pokey, and get that

damned wagon across the creek before it rises," Nute Shelby yelled. "Hurry it up, men. Get back of that herd and if it wants to stampede, send it north. We'll round 'em up later. Get going!"

THEY got going. Jude had never realized that men could move so fast. He saw scrambling cow punchers rolling up tarp bedrolls and running toward the bedroll wagon. By now he was on his feet, his shoes with strings awkwardly tied—never in his life had he seen men move so fast—, and watching Pokey. The cook was grabbing up pots and pans and literally tossing them into the chuckwagon. Jude jumped in to give him a hand and in a matter of minutes Pokey was lifting up the hinged chuckboard and fastening it into place.

"The harness is all laid out in front of the wagon," Pokey bellowed. "Grab the two front bridles and I'll get the wheelers."

They ran for the front of the wagon. Horses by the dozen were milling around the remuda corral and a man was down by the opening, cursing while he worked at the rope knot on the gate. Men were saddling like mad. The sound of the bawling herd came louder. The remuda milled and Jude saw a black faced rider: a Negro.

"They're going to stampede," called somebody's voice. "Let's roll, boys."

Jude found the bridles, laid out beyond the end of the wagon tongue. He grabbed them up, the leather familiar to his hand. He was, after all, a farmer; and this was something that he understood.

"Which ones?" he called to Pokey as the two of them ran toward the corral. The Negro was spurring hard at a run around the outer circle of the milling remuda. Some of the "bunch quitters" were trying to get away. That was one of the tough jobs of a wrangler: the bane of his life were bunch quitters. As long as they knew you were watching them they'd stay put. But just let them get the idea you were loafing in the shade of your horse, taking things easy, and they'd start an unobtrusive graze off in the direction of the nearest gully. The Negro flashed past, a lean dark form in the saddle.

"Which ones?" Jude called again.

"That grey and black," the cook bellowed. "You can catch 'em with a bridle. I won't have a team I can't catch. Whoa, now, Gert! Stand still. Come here, you old fool! It's me . . . Pokey."

Jude spotted the Grey and called, "Whoa, boy," and started herding him in. But it was a storm and the grey wasn't going to be caught. Then, right over his head, a rope sang out and settled squarely over the recalcitrant one's neck. The Negro hauled up, and even in the darkness, still split by lightning flashes, Jude could see his friendly grin.

"There you are, boy," called the night wrangler. "Take the rope offen his head and I'll get you the other."

Jude bridled with sure fingers and slipped off the noose. The Negro coiled his rope and a wizened little man, also with bridles, called out, "Dam' you, Bugger, let the kid catch his and you try giving me a hand."

It was "All Alone," the crippled ex-puncher who drove the bedroll wagon.

All Alone limped badly and couldn't get around much.

"Sure will, Mistuh Alone. Just a minute till I spot 'em."

The horses were still milling around the remuda corral. Most of the riders already had saddled and disappeared into the night. Two men were tearing down the rope lines of the remuda corral, coiling the wet rope and yanking at the stakes. They were cursing as they ran pantingly, dragging the stuff toward the bedroll wagon. Peanut, the day wrangler, another dried up old timer unfit for regular riding, was helping the Negro night wrangler to hold the remuda. Jude came out leading the black and grey by the bridles. He trotted off toward the wagon, discovering to his surprise that Pokey already was there, harnessing fast.

Jude swung his mounts into place and felt with sure hands for the harness on the grounds. His strong young hands worked fast with collars and hames and back bands. He backed the team into place in front of the wheelers and was back to harness the second of them. He couldn't see Pokey's look of surprise in the night. Pokey had been boasting that he could harness a team faster than any man that ever walked on two legs.

"Look out for Gert on the right side," he called as Jude went in to hook the trace chains. "She'll kick the head off anybody but me."

She didn't kick Jude. He already was in

between them, hooking the chains. The four stood strung out, ready to go. Pokey grabbed the lines and went up over the hub of the left front wheel and Jude vaulted into the seat beside him. Off in the night came the drum of hoofs and that ominous bawling. All Alone wasn't quite ready.

"Hurry it up," roared Pokey to the frantically limping man. "We got to git acrost that crick and clear the herd or they'll be on top of us."

ALL ALONE hurled back a curse and Jude jumped from the seat, hitting the now wet ground. He ran forward and ducked in, giving the bedroll wagon driver a hand.

"Let's go!" came the cook's bellowing voice. "Let's get out of here."

All Alone went up, taking the lines Jude handed him. The team was stomping and snorting, a little frightened.

"Ridin' with me, kid?" he called down.

"I'll go with Pokey," Jude called and back. He vaulted up again and Pokey's booted foot slashed hard at the iron brake handle, unlocking it.

"Git!" he bawled . . . and they "got."

The four horse team hit the traces and the big chuckwagon lurched forward with a snap that threw Jude's head back.

"Git!" Pokey roared again, slashing the lines down on their galloping rumps. "Roll out of here, you lousy busted down bunch of bones!"

They went out at a gallop, broke into a run, and Jude clung to the side of the seat, aware that this was the wildest ride a man ever took. Beside him Pokey sat with both legs braced, hauling and sawing at the lines while he peered throught the rainy darkness. They crashed through a clump of brush and then hit some kind of a mound. The wheels went high into the air and then hit with a jar that shook Jude's spine.

They were heading due north, straight for the creek a quarter of a mile away. Pokey began shouting, "Whoa, now," and pulling back hard on the lines. But the running team were stretched out in full stride and wouldn't stop. The cook slapped on the brakes and the locked rear wheels slid through the mud and grass .The waters of the creek were just ahead.

Pokey got the panting team down to something resembling a trot and then released the brake again. Jude looked back. All Alone, in the lighter bedroll wagon, was just back of them.

"Git!" Pokey bellowed. "Git on in there," slapping the lines down on their rumps.

But the horses that had but, seconds before, been running now displayed a strange disinclination to continue forward. The leaders were rearing and fighting the bits. Twenty feet ahead of them the dark waters of the creek lapped at the grass. Probably a cloud burst up above, Jude thought. The waters were up and rising still faster.

Pokey fought them and they almost got tangled up in the harness. "They won't cross," Pokey yelled. "The dam' fools have been through this before but they're still afraid of water. Git! Git! Gert, git out of it and come on across."

Jude leaned back, twisting around in the seat. His sack was just back of it where he first had tossed it before helping the cook put in the cooking pots. He brought out the coiled bull whip. Twenty feet of plaited leather. From the time his father had brought it home three years before the blacksnake had held a strange fascination for him. To his farmer boy eyes it was more than just a whip. It was a thing alive, its sleek, plaited length something to be revered.

He had used that whip much, practicing hour after hour. He wore out popper after popper, replacing them with knife cut strips of tanned rawhide, snapping away at fence posts and any other object within reach. He could throw it out with a curling motion of his arm, wrapping the coils around the neck of a milk pen calf without hurting it, and then hauling it away from the cow while his mother sat milking and smiling at the vagaries of such a son. When she had wanted a chicken killed Jude never wrang its neck. He simply had gone out into the yard back of the house and snapped its head off with the beloved bull whip. Later he had tried holding a match between thumb and index finger of his left hand and then cutting it in two with the end of the popper. A few experiences with a slashed left hand hadn't discouraged him. He waited until the injury healed, wrapped a towel around his left hand, and went back to practice with the blacksnake. And once he had lit the head af a match so held, a feat that sent him around for

days boasting to his mother.

He uncoiled the whip now, sitting beside Pokey in the balked chuckwagon. Its twenty foot length went out, trailing in the wet grass, and then it sang forward. He could make out the outlines of their rumps in the night. Gert leaped forward and the others fell in. They hit the night waters of the rapidly rising creek, fighting and sloshing; And Jude coiled the blacksnake once more. Three minutes later they were across. The dripping team strained and struggled up the incline and Pokey, a look of astonishment on his face, wheeled them around on a rise and looked back.

In the night the rumble of a stampeding herd came above the roar of the storm.

"Almighty God!" the cook cried out. They're running *south!* The boys couldn't turn 'em!"

CHAPTER V

THE team pulling the bedroll wagon had quite willingly followed the chuckwagon across the now turbulent waters. Jude had looked back and, in the light of the lightning flashes, could see it half floating, the water up above the floor bed. Those bedrolls, hastily flung in as their owners ran for the remuda corral were soaking wet, he knew.

The wizened, crippled driver rocked up alongside of them, almost hub to hub. He hauled back on the lines and looked across at Jude and Pokey.

"Wonder what time it is?" he called.

" 'Bout three o'clock," Pokey grunted. "Seems to me they broke kind of sudden."

"That's what I was thinkin'. Lord help them boys out there. Son," this to Jude, "don't you ever get any fool ideas about becoming a cow puncher. It's a dog's life. You stick with farmin'."

Jude didn't answer. He sat in the pelting rain, wet all the way to the skin, listening. Far to the south the rumble of the running herd was broken by sharp popping sounds.

"What's that?" he asked Pokey.

"Six shooters. They're tryin' to turn 'em with gunfire. Sometimes it works and sometimes it don't. Well, let's make camp and get a fire goin'. The boys'll be straggling' in purty soon and'll want coffee and lots of it. Git, Maud! Come on . . . git!"

The huge chuckwagon lurched and went into motion toward a rise visible on the dark wet horizon a quarter of a mile to the west. Beyond was a dark mass of stunted prairie trees.

"Got to git clear of the crossin'," the cook explained to Jude. "Don't want no damn trail herd of three thousand steers runnin' over my camp."

They hauled up on the gentle rise, the bedroll wagon back of them. It was still raining. Jude could feel the water hitting his soaked shirt and running down the length of his spine. He jumped down and felt the wetness of the grass sink into his shoes.

"What'll we do with the team?" he asked, unhooking them.

"Unharness and put on hobbles," Pokey said. "I'll get 'em out of the wagon. The wranglers'll probably hold the remuda on the other side to give the boys fresh mounts. They can swim 'em across in the mornin'. Lord, what a night."

Jude's strong young hands worked at the harness. He slid it off their wet rumps and put it on the front wheels, out of the mud. Pokey was down in front, working at their forefeet. The six mounts made awkward, jumping movements and disappeared into the rain filled night and the little crippled man came over. He took off his streaming hat and wiped the rain from his face with a soaked sleeve.

"Hell of a night," he commented.

Pokey had taken a tarp and ropes from the wagon and was rigging a shelter from the left rear wheel.

"If you got an ax and a lantern handy I'll try to cut and split some dry wood," Jude offered.

"No need to, son. I allus carry dried cow chips and some wood in the wagon for just such cases like this. Comes in handy on a roundup, in case of rain. Here . . . take this ax and drive in these iron stakes while I git the lantern lit and the wood out."

They got the shelter rigged and the cook brought out a glass jug of kerosene. It seemed that the range wise old Pokey was prepared for almost any emergency. In a matter of minutes the three of them were warming themselves over a fire blazing beneath the tarp shelter. Pokey went for the huge coffee pot.

"The rain's lettin' up," he finally said.

Grey dawn broke over a rolling, undulating prairie land, soaked to the core.

Jude swung the twenty-foot black-snake like a living thing—

and the terror-stricken horses surged against the rising stream

The canvas on the two wagons drooped dispiritedly, heavy with wetness. A quarter of a mile south of them the flood creek waters roiled past, carrying debris and floating cottonwoods. Normally the creek was forty yards wide and three feet deep. It was one hundred and fifty yards of brown, swirling waters now.

Cattle, tired out from the run, began to straggle in sight on the south horizon They gathered into miserable, bawling groups, which grew in size, and presently riders put in appearance. One of them was Blackie. He had a man in front of him in the saddle. They came to the creek's edge and Blackie slid off. He waded out into the stream while the other man sat drunkenly. The horse hesitated and then went in. Jude saw Blackie's hand on the horn, swimming alongside the horse, being carried downstream. But they got across witout too much difficulty. They landed one hundred and fifty yards below the starting point and Blackie, his leather chaps soaked to sogginess, came on, leading the mount. He pulled up as the three men at the wagons went out to give him a hand.

They hauled the half unconscious man out of the saddle and carried him to the shelter.

"Horse fell on him, huh?" Pokey asked.

"No," Blackie replied. "He's been shot."

"Shot! Who the hell did it? One of the boys trying to turn the steers?"

"It was no accident, Pokey. The herd was stampeded by a rider waving a slicker. God, that coffee smells good."

HE POURED himself a cup from the steaming pot while the cook went to work on the wounded man. The crippled little driver of the other wagon—his name was Joe—was over spreading soggy bedrolls all over the place. In a matter of hours the sun would come out, boiling hot. The sky was clear, the rain gone. Jude bustled about the wagon, helping the cook get breakfast. The Negro night wrangler and Peanut put the cavvy across shortly after sunup, after holding them across the creek the rest of the night. It was bunched on a hill two hundred yards away. the bunch quitters for once showing no inclination to wander off. Riders began to straggle in, wet, tired, and hungry. They ate in silence, changed horses, and swam back again to work the rapidly growing herd. At ten o'clock Nute Shelby rode up. He swung down, and like the others, went straight to the fire. His face was grim. There was grimness all over the place. The wounded man lay on his back on his soggy bedroll, out in the sun now.

"Any missin'?" Pokey asked.

Pokey, like any chuckwagon cook, held a special place in the outfit. Any other man talking to the taciturn foreman at a time like this, might have fared differently.

"Two hundred head, I reckon," Shelby said.

"How can you tell?" Jude asked.

The trail boss looked up from his plate and a half smile came over his hard, practical face, "well it's like this, son," he said. "Some critters are marked differently. You got a brindle steer, a few big black ones, maybe one with a slash of white along it's flanks. You got to know them. I call 'em markers. We got about twenty head in this herd that we know by sight. Then when they stampede like they did and we round up, we start lookin' for markers. We got two missing. You can always figger that when a marker don't show up there's anywhere from fifty to a hundred head with him. Savvy?"

"Yessir," Jude said.

"They didn't look like they're in a mind to cross," Pokey said. "All tired out, mad, and bawlin'. You got a job cut out fer yu, I'm thinkin'."

"We'll get 'em across," the trail boss said.

He rose from his haunches, placed plate and knife and fork in the big pan of water provided for that purpose, went to his horse. He swung up and loped toward the distant remuda, his mount's hoofs throwing up mud gobs.

"There goes a good man," Joe remarked.

"Yah," Pokey replied. "A good cowman . . . and about as sociable as a Mexican fighting cock. But he's all right," he finished.

It was decided to try and put the herd accross about noon. The waters had subsided somewhat, but were still high. Riders were out on fresh horses, far to the south, scouring the country for the missing strays. They would hold the herd until the strays were found. They and one rider. A man named Webbly hadn't shown up.

Then, just before noon, he put in ap-

pearance. He lay face down across one of the other men's saddle. His horse too had been killed. The two of them had gone down in a futile effort to try and turn the madly running herd. Jude felt queer inside when they brought him in and laid him out over by the chuckwagon tongue. He wasn't a day more than twenty-four. Jude turned away, sick inside. Grady was eating near the fire.

"What's the matter, farmer?" he jeered. "Never saw a dead man before? You'll see plenty if you stay around the cow country long enough."

"You shut up," Pokey said.

"You go to hell," Grady said sourly. "I was a nester once myself and I'll talk as I damn please."

He swaggered over to the dirty dish pan, tossed in his plate and knife and fork, and mounted, heading for the cavvy and a fresh horse. Pokey said, "I never liked that big snot. Son, I got a grubbin' hoe and spade here. Maybe you better go up on the hill and start diggin' a grave for Webbly. Six feet long and three wide. I'll try to fix up a headboard with his name branded on it. I'll use a piece of iron to etch in the letterin'."

JUDE took the implements and walked over toward the opposite slope, lying west of them. He found strange emotions filling him to the brim. This was a kind of thing he never before had encountered. A man was killed, doing his job, and they had to bury him within a short distance of where he fell because there were three thousand wild Texas steers to be pushed on to the buyer, the loading pens, and the eastern slaughterhouses. The east was crying for Texas beef. Jude found a spot beneath the outspreading branches of a mesquite tree and began to dig.

He dug for two hours, pausing now and then to wipe the sweat from his face. The sun was out, hot after the night storm. The good earth seemed to be steaming. He looked down across the swell of the prairie. The creek was still up and the riders had, for the last half hour, been trying to fight them across. But the herd had balked. Even the two great black steers, leaders of the herd, refused to budge. They were tired, hungry, and angry. Jude got the grave down to four feet and went down to dinner. The body of Webbly, now covered with a canvas tarp, still lay where it had been placed. The wounded man smoked complacently, his right thigh bound in bandages made from washed flour sacks. The riders swam across by turns and ate hungrily.

The herd was at an impasse.

"Never saw 'em so damned stubborn," Pokey commented to nobody in particular. "Guess they're gittin' all tired out. But that's a cow critter fer yu. We git within a hundred and fifty miles of Abilene and they balk. Guess we'll have to wait until the creek goes down."

Jude spoke up from his plate. He was sitting alongside Blackie. "I can tell you how to get them across . . . I think," he said hesitatingly.

There were seven men at the fire. Seven pairs of eyes swung and focused themselves on his young face. Nute Shelby paused over his plate.

"Yeah?" he said.

"It's what an Indian once told me," Jude got out hurriedly and a little timidly. "They were driving two hundred head of Government bought cattle to the reservation and run into a creek like this one, all swollen with water after a hard rain."

Shelby had continued eating. He said nothing. Jude dropped his face to his plate.

"How did they do it, Jude?" Blackie's soft voice asked. "A man's never too old to learn. I figured Indians as knowing more about cattle than cow punchers, but then you never can tell. Me . . . I've got an open mind. It never hurts to listen. How did they do it?"

"Well," Jude was talking directly to Blackie now, "it seems like when they wouldn't cross these Indians went down into the willows and cut a bunch of clubs. They beat the first bunch of lead steers across and the others followed right along. He said it was easy because the cattle didn't like to have those clubs bouncing off their heads. He was some kind of minor chief and spoke pretty good English. Lots of them come by our place," he added.

Blackie's face lifted. His eyes met those of Nute Shelby. He said, "Well, Nute?"

"I'm still running the outfit, Blackie. We'll put 'em across after dinner. They get hungry enough from being bunched and they'll cross."

Jude got up and put away his eating

utensils. "I guess I better get back to the digging," he said to Blackie. "I'm down four feet now."

Shelby's voice came from across the fire. "That's deep enough so's the coyotes won't get him. Don't waste anymore time. We've got more important things to think of. You and Joe pack him up there, kid. Soon's we get the herd across I'll hold burial services and we'll get on our way."

They changed horses again and went back across the still swiftly running waters. Jude, under Pokey's directions, to an ax and went west, past the grave, into the mesquites. He began cutting and piling wood. An hour later Peanut rode up. Peanut was sixty if he was a day, and though Jude had no way of knowing it Peanut had watched Major-General Jeb Stuart receive his mortal wound at Yellow Tavern in the wild fight with Sheridan's cavalry.

"How are you-all, son?" the wrangler asked, reining up.

"Pretty good," Jude said. "How are you making out with the cattle?"

Peanut was taking down his rope, building a large loop in his small but powerful hands. He shook it out until its spread touched the ground.

"Ah reckon they ain't," he said. "Crittuhs can be powerful ornery sometimes. Heah. Put this heah rope around 'bout ten of them sticks theah and ah'll drag 'em ovuh to the wagon. Nevuh see sech a belly ackuh as thet Pakey. He worries moah about wood than ah do about who lost the wahr between the States. I'll send that nigguh Buggah ovah fo' the rest. It ain't his job, him bein' the night wrangler, but I brought that nigguh west with me when he wasn't moah'n a pickaninny an' he'll jump when ah pop the whip."

JUDE took the loop and fastened it around enough of the dry wood to make a good load. Peanut turned, dallying around the saddle horn. The rope tightened and the cow horse, straining away, moved toward the chuckwagon with the load dragging away behind. Twenty minutes later the Negro youth came loping up. He gave Jude a friendly grin.

"How you makin' out, boy?" he asked.

"Pretty good. Peanut said he'd send you over. You want me to loop up this wood?"

"That Peanut. Now there's a man fo' you." Bugger was swinging down. "Nobody around this camp knows it but my mammy and pappy wuz slaves of his family down in Gawgie-uh until Mistuh Lincoln freed 'em. Peanut's real name is Cunnel Edward Sutherworth. But that country sho' was in bad shape after the wahr. So the Cunnel stuck around for a few years an' finally he ups and decides to come out west. He tol' my mammy and pappy, "You's freed now but ah'll take this Bugger with me out west,' so heah we is. We been rovin' 'round the country evuh since, me an' the Cunnel, which is how come ah turned up as night wrangulah on this heah outfit. Cunnel got me the job."

He was smoking a cigarette from the tobacco Jude had given the men, bending to loop the rope. He pulled it up tight around the last of the wood and swung up again, strong and lithe in the saddle, with seemingly not a care in the world. He looked down at Jude.

"Heah comes Grady. Wonder whut he wants? Look heah, white boy, don't you say nuthin' about what I tol' you about the Cunnel bein' a Cunnel. He's Peanuts, an' nobody asts questions about who a man is or wheah he come fum."

"I understand," Jude said.

"Fine. Cunnel knew I tol' you that an' he'd skin my black hide right off my black backside."

CHAPTER VI

GRADY reined up and looked down at Jude. "Gimme that ax, farmer, and be quick about it."

Jude stared back at the bigger youth. He didn't like Grady at all; he liked him less and less every time they met.

"I ain't keeping it from you," he said. "There it is."

"Hand it up here."

"You were sent up to get it. I ain't keeping you from getting it."

Bugger rocked in the saddle. "Wha-wha-wha!" he roared with laughter, slapping his thigh. "That li'l ol' farmer boy he sho' done tol' you where to head in. 'I ain't keepin' you-all fum it,' he says. *Wha-wha-wha!*"

Grady turned on him fiercely. "You shut yore dirty lousy mouth," he snarled, "or I'll fix you plenty."

"You-all'll fix nothin', white man. You

gits funny with me an' Peanut'll just nat'ully blow yo' head right off. You-all'd look funny walkin' around widout a head. Just like a dawg-goned chicken whut got it chopped off fo' the Sunday dinner pot. Wha-wha-wha!"

Grady snarled at him again and rode over, bending from the saddle. He almost made it, fumbling on the ground, and then had to dismount to pick up the implement. He swung up again, holding it across the saddle in front of him.

"If you wasn't just a tramp maverick I'd beat yore head off," he sneered. "An' I think I'll do it anyhow when we git to Abilene."

"I expect," Jude said, "that one reason you're bluffing is because of what Blackie would do to you. But you don't have to worry. I won't let him take a hand. So you can get down and take off that gunbelt anytime."

"I ain't got time. Nute wants this ax. But I'll get you yet." Grady wheeled and loped away, down toward the creek.

Bugger was grinning like a black gargoyle. "I sho' wish he'd a called yo' booger, boy. Dawg-goned if ah don't think you-all could give 'im a round or two."

He leaned his hard, lithe body to one side and let the rope tighten. The wood began to move on its way to Pokey's domain. Bugger most likely couldn't read or write, having had little opportunity for education either before the former Confederate Colonel picked him up and certainly not afterward. But in Jude's opinion the Negro wrangler was as good a rider and roper and a better man than Grady.

He stood watching as the jogging horse passed the bedroll wagon, coming up. Joe had hooked up the team, put the dead man into his bedroll, and was bringing him up. He hauled up beside the grave and found Jude waiting. Joe got limpingly down and went around to the back, letting down the tail gate.

"We might as well leave him in outa the sun until Nute and the boys get here," he said. "And that might be quite awhile from the looks of things. Nothing to do but wait."

He sat down in the shade of the wagon and removed his hat to reveal a bald head, then rolled a smoke. Jude rolled one too, his eyes on the distant herd. Grady was back across now and Jude saw Nute Shelby waving his hands toward the willows. The buck-toothed, foul mouthed puncher swung down near a screen of willows and began to slash away. Fifteen minutes later he had several clubs of about four feet in length and from an inch to two inches in diameter. Riders rode up and each took a club. They spurred into the head of the heard and the clubs began to thud off red hides and bounce off backs and noses. A new note rose in the distant bawling. Three riders rushed a small group and, under a hail of blows, the steers broke. They pushed out into the stream and began to swim. The clubs flailed anew and more followed.

The heard was on its way across.

Joe sat there watching the dripping twenty-eight hundred lumber by nearly a mile to the east. He said, "Well, I'll be damned. Now I've seen everything. And me workin' cattle since we started rounding up unbranded mavericks right after the close of the war."

Five of the riders broke away from the heard and galloped to the chuckwagon. Jude could see Nute Shelby talking to Pokey from the saddle. He was gesticulating. Pokey handed him something from the wagon and then the trail boss turned toward one of the men and again said something; an order of some kind. The rider — it was Grady — started loping toward the four hobbled chuckwagon mounts grazing some distance to the north.

"We're movin' out," Joe announced. "Here comes Nute and Blackie and Cic and Mike. Guess that's the buryin' party." He rose to his feet and put on his hat.

The four riders came up at a fast trot and swung down. Nute Shelby looked at Jude in a strange kind of way and said nothing. He rapped out to Joe, "Get him out of there and into the ground, Joe. We've lost more than a half day and got to get rolling."

Jude sprang to the back and together he and the limping little man carried the tarp covered figure in its blankets and lowered it into the hole. The men gathered around and the trail boss took a Bible from his belt where it had been shoved down inside against his stomach.

He read a very short burial service, closed the book, and looked at the others, putting on his hat. "Blackie, you and the boys get back to the herd. Jude, you fill in this grave with the shovel. Joe, get rolling

and load up them bedrolls and the ropes and stuff for the corral. Pokey's getting ready to hitch up. Get that grave filled up as soon as you can, Jude, then go down and give Pokey a hand. That's all, boys."

IN TWO minutes Jude was left alone. He went to work, filling in the shallow grave, and trying his best to make the mound neat and uniform. He picked up the tools and made his way down to the wagon. Pokey already was hooked and loaded. One of the men was helping Joe with the corral ropes.

"All right, Jude, let's roll," the cook said. "Climb up, son."

Jude went up over a hub and Pokey said "Here, hold this."

It was a small board from a precious pile he kept for kindling, made from a goods box. On it, burned with a heated iron stake, were the words, *Webbly, from Texas.*

That was all. They stopped at the grave long enough to put it at the head, sinking it down about half way and knowing that a few more rain storms such as last night would soon have it awry, the grave partly caved in. Jude was filled with a strange sadness as Pokey yelled, "Git!" and they went out at a fast trot.

They passed the leaders and rolled on, the water barrels sloshing wildly. Several miles from the still swollen creek they made dry camp that night, supper being ready by the time the tired, worn out riders came in. There was no talk that night. Exhausted men ate silently and wolfishly, smoked a cigarette, and promptly sought their tarps. Jude bustled about, trying to appear busy when Nute Shelby's eyes were on him, for he half feared the curt trail boss. He washed the dishes as fast as they were dirtied, a job that sometimes each man did for himself, since it saved needed time for the cook. The dishes done he went beneath the wagon, where the new supply of wood had been lashed, brought out some and chopped wood for the morning fire. He worked steadly and silently, unaware that the eyes of the trail boss and Blackie were upon him, the former in speculation, the latter in satisfaction. He had saved them hours of precious time with the herd, quite unaware of the importance of it.

They rolled away from the bedding grounds at daylight the next morning with everything going smoothly, the wounded rider in the bedroll wagon with Joe. There had been no more talk about the shooting. But there was an ominous something about it that spelled trouble. Nobody made any speculations that you could hear. The two hundred head were gone, their tracks washed out by the rain.

The herd moved on and more miles of the flat country fell back of them to be lost in the distance. It was a day to day repetition of hard, tedious work, but to Jude Gordon it was a new world. He kept his eyes and ears open and learned things about horses and men and ranches and how cattle were handled. He heard talk about scab and how you shot a scrub range bull on sight so he wouldn't breed his puny strain into beef cattle. He heard stories of gunfights and gun fighters, of dance-halls and girls who worked in them, practicing two professions, dancing and the oldest in the world; and when this last named was mentioned he saw the buck-toothed Grady lick his lips and grin.

"Whiskey ain't the only thing I'm goin' to buy me when I git to Abilene either," he had grinned. "I got a lot of lost time to make up fer."

"Hmp!" sneered Pokey bitingly. "Ye better take a dam' fool's advice and keep away from 'em. All yu'll git is somethin' that'll have ye walkin' goofy-eyed fer three months. Dam' all women, say I. The bad ones'll take ye and the good ones'll keep ye broke with a bull ring in yer nose."

"How do *you* know so much about it?" Grady jeered back.

"I had three wives," snapped the cook. "Two good ones and one from the honky-tonks. Personally, I'd take a quart of panther juice anytime."

And the days rolled on until the noon when the herd lumbered across a small rise and found itself on the plains before Abilene.

Abilene was a rough, tough town that they had all seen before; with pleasure and anticipation they looked forward to seeing it again. There was very little that a man couldn't do if he wanted to, in this rugged cow-town.

CHAPTER VII

NUTE SHELBY rode with Blackie at point when they first sighted Abilene in the distance, miles away across the flat

prairie. The foreman was more worried than he cared to admit. Beneath his hard, taciturn exterior he wasn't just quite sure what the next move would be. Reports had drifted down the trail that you didn't have to worry about cars; there were plenty. And buyers aplenty too. He didn't exactly know what the next move should be. All the way up the trail, fighting the elements across the long miles of Texas and then on through Oklahoma Territory into Kansas he had been too much occupied with the problems at hand. Get the herd through. Come hell or high water, get the herd through.

There had been plenty of hell and there had been plenty of high water. He was still remembering the creek of one hundred and fifty miles back and how a green nester kid in overalls had shown them how to cross it.

Blackie, riding beside him, seemed to read his thoughts. The eyes of both men went to the chuckwagon off to the left, two hundred yards away, keeping pace with the leaders. Normally Pokey wrapped up his four and hit out ahead, judging the distance the herd would make between meals, and preparing accordingly. But now there was no reaon for them to go on. That nester kid had been here three times before and had led them unerringly. Without him they might have missed the town by fifteen or twenty miles.

"He's a good kid." Shelby finally admitted. They could see Jude riding in the seat with Pokey.

"He's got something all right," Blackie said. "That kid's got the makings of a good cow hand, Nute. I'd like to take him back with us."

"If he wants to go," grunted the trail boss.

"Sure. If he wants to go."

Then silence again. Back of them the leaders plodded on. The twenty-eight hundred were strung out for more than a mile. The trail boss was sick over the loss of those two hundred head during the storm and stampede. Shelby's eyes swept the plain. Just one herd out there in the distance. Again Blackie seemed to read what was in the other's mind.

"Takes a lot of time to load a herd," Blackie commented. "Jude saw two go by within a week. No telling how many more were coming in from other directions. Five of what you owe me gets you one of what the old man is going to get out of this herd says that's the NP outfit over there. Waiting for cars. Ten more of what I've got coming says those two hundred lost head will turn up here with our T4 brand on their hides. Want to bet?"

"Maybe they rebranded," grunted Shelby.

"Who?"

"Rustlers. Never heard of rustlers working close to a shipping point, but anything can happen in this business. They could rebrand and run in with another herd."

"They were two days ahead of us. And we lost hours until that nester kid showed us how to get across Gramma Creek."

"I know."

The answer was short, typical of the trail boss. The loss of those two hundred cattle was a sore spot with him. He lived for cattle. He'd been entrusted with three thousand prime steers and he was showing up with a two hundred head shortage. It didn't matter that a man couldn't figure on the elements. The fact that they were gone because of a storm meant little in the trail boss's way of thinking. The NP outfit had beaten him in, and were waiting for cars. And Harrison, their head, was a tough man; a sneering, vindictive man.

"If I could get a look at some of that NP stuff and see any signs of fresh rebranding," Blackie said, "it wouldn't be much trouble to shoot a steer and skin it. Our old T4 brand would show beneath the hide."

"And have a fight on our hands. Not in this town. Wild Bill Hickock is marshal and from what I hear he's a bad man to tangle with. Don't you worry about the two hundred head. We'll have a few days and I'm keeping my eyes open. I got a hunch they'll show up. Well, I'd better go over and tell Pokey where to put the wagon. Grass looks good two miles east of here. We'll try it anyhow. Tell the wing men to start swinging them. Get the leaders over and we'll pull in about two miles west of the herd down there."

He rode off at a gallop, toward the rumbling chuckwagon. Blackie turned in the saddle and threw up his hand in signal to the right wing man on the east side, two hundred yards to the rear. A light rain had fallen the night before and there was a little dust. Blackie turned to the west, the

two big, dark colored steers now acknowledged as leaders instinctively following the horse. The right wing man had taken down his coiled rope from the saddle. He doubled it and began whacking steers on their lean rumps.

"Ho-ho-ho," he called, striking right and left at the bobbing rumps. The bellows increased but the head of that long line of steers, sinuous like the curve of a snake's body, swung to the west. They plodded on. Back along the flank men caught the relayed signal and acted accordingly. The drag was far behind. Nearly one hundred head of sore footed and limping steers, the latter victims of the late stampede in the rain at Gramma Creek. Two riders were bringing them up. Four hundred yards to the rear of the chuckwagon came the cavvy herded at a grazing pace by the former Confederate Colonel and the Negro he had brought with him out of "Gawg-ia." Bugger was too filled with excitement to sleep the day through.

FOR this was the end of the long trail for all of them. Their first time up. That nester kid certainly knew the country, all right!

Nute Shelby pulled up alongside the right front wheel of the wagon.

"There she is, boss," Pokey called down. "And it looks like we got visitors." "Looks that way," grunted the trail boss.

"Cattle buyers," Jude said to Pokey. "They'll be in on you like bees."

"We're turning the herd," Shelby said, working his horse in close to the lumbering four horse chuckwagon. "Swing over and camp somewhere about two miles west of that other herd over there. Fix supper for about six men. The rest of the boys will be eating in town, I reckon."

"Aw, hell, Nute," Pokey protested. "Let 'em get their own supper tonight. I got business in town."

The riders, three of them, were now but a hundred yards away; men in city clothes and the kind of stovepipe hats Lincoln had worn. Jude, sitting in the seat beside the cook, wondered how a man could keep one of those hats straight while riding at a gallop. Strung out on the plain back of them were two more groups. More cattle buyers. The trail boss's confidence suddenly took an upsurge

But he was still Shelby, the man who had brought them through. He said, "That's too dam' bad, Pokey, but some of the boys have got to hold this herd. Everybody can't go into town. And they've got to eat. I . . ."

The first of the group, of buyers came up. He was a florid faced man with long, dark sideburns on his cheeks.

"Pardon me, sir," he said. "But where can I find the man in charge of this herd?"

"You're looking at him," Nute Shelby said, curtly.

"Glad to meet you, sir. My name's Willoughby. I represent the Willoughby Cattle Company. Shippers, you know. We'd like to buy this herd. Every hoof. And we pay cash."

He named a price that left the trail boss's mouth slightly open. Shelby cleared his throat. Twenty-eight hundred head at . . .

"Tell him not to take it," Jude's voice said. "He can get more."

He had intended it as a whisper to Pokey. But the words had carried. Other men in derby and beaver hats were coming up. Shelby hesitated.

"Hold it, sir," cried out a man topped by a beaver. "I'm prepared to pay you more."

The third came up. "Gentlemen," he cried, and this appeared to be directed at Shelby and Pokey and Jude as well. "I have a full crew of men to take charge of this herd, if you'll sell it to me . . ."

Jude saw the trail boss relax suddenly. He almost lounged in the saddle. Three men began to bid. The last man to arrive was short and wiry. His presence seemed to be resented by the others.

"I've got a full crew of men to take over this herd, sir," he cried to the now lounging trail boss. "I'll pay on the hoof according to your count. Cash on the barrel head."

Nute Shelby ignored him. He turned to Pokey. "Maybe," he said in the softest voice Jude ever imagined he could speak, even to the cook, "you won't have to fix supper after all, Pokey." And to the man: "Mister, you've just bought yourself about twenty-eight hundred head of Texas steers. Get your crew out here and take over."

"Thank you, sir. My company pays the highest prices."

"This time. Maybe not next time." And to the two unsuccessful bidders: "Sorry, men. The herd's sold." And again to the buyer: "That's the herd and nothing else.

The cavvy and wagons stay with the outfit."

"Agreed, sir. Stand by while I return to town for my men."

"One moment," Nute Shelby called as the buyer wheeled his horse.

"Yes?"

"I said twenty-eight hundred. That don't include the two lead steers. They're going back to Texas with the wagons. I might need 'em again some time."

"They're all yours, mister."

The man who had just bought the herd loped away, followed by the others at a disgruntled trot. Pokey licked his lips. "I'll put the wagon in close to town so's in case the boys want any grub it'll be handy."

A fleeting grin crossed the trail boss's pleased face. "I can imagine," he said, about how much cooking *you'll* be doing while we're here."

He turned and galloped off.

CHAPTER VIII

THE hotel room was the biggest in the place, almost twenty-five feet square. It was on the second floor, on a corner overlooking the street. From below came the sounds of a town that was busy in late afternoon and preparing for more business as night came on. Jude stood in his overalls, back to the wall, and looked at the men grouped about Shelby.

The trail boss sat at a small table, a kind of tally book in front of him. Beside it was piled more money than Jude had ever thought existed. The ragged riders, fifteen of them, were crowded around, their eyes bright with eagerness and expectation. As each man was paid off he hurried out. Some were making for the first bar to start loading up on whiskey. Others were heading for the nearest store to outfit themselves with new clothes before doing the town. Near where Jude stood the Negro Bugger waited beside Peanut, the day wrangler. Peanut who once had worn the uniform of a Confederate Colonel.

One by one the men filed out. Jude stood waiting. He didn't know why he should be here, but Blackie had insisted. He shifted to the other foot, feeling green and out of place, his belongings in the sack beside him.

One by one the riders received their pay and filed out. Blackie tucked the money into his ragged pants pocket and came over as Bugger and Peanut went forward to be paid off.

"Smoke, Jude?" the twogun rider asked, extending the sack.

Jude took it, rolling. Now that he was here he hadn't quite made up his mind what the next move would be. Probably get a job in town, maybe at a livery or with one of the bone pickers. He was strong. He guessed that he could find something. He smoked and watched Peanut and Bugger file out. Then, to his astonishment, he heard his name called by the trail boss.

Shelby looked up over the still considerable pile of money in front of him. "I got you down for one hundred dollars," he said curtly. "Here it is."

Jude stared at him, started to demur. But the foreman already had dismissed the matter with a curt nod, making notations in the black tally book.

Blackie's voice said, "Take it, Jude. You earned it in a lot of ways. He wouldn't be paying you unless he figured you're worth it. Don't forget the five out of Grady's pay for the liquor," he added.

"I'd forgotten," grunted Shelby and handed over the money. He lifted his hard eyes to Jude's face. His voice, when he spoke again, was a little softer. "You can go back to Texas with us, if you want to, son. The outfit will be leaving in a few days, depending upon a number of things It's not an easy life on the T4. Thirty dollars a month for you, working from daylight until darkness, and sometimes longer than that. Hot in summer and so cold in the winter it'll cut you like a knife. Cattle as wild as antelopes and a damn sight meaner. But if you're fool enough to want to make a cow puncher, then by God, we'll make a cow puncher out of you."

It was, Jude thought, the nearest thing to being real human Shelby had ever displayed.

"I'll go," Jude said. "I'll try to earn my pay."

"You'll earn it. If you don't, I'll fire you damned quick."

"Come on, Jude," Blackie said. "If you're going to become a cowhand, you'll have to get outfitted. Let's go."

Jude picked up his belongings in the sack and they went out into the hallway and descended the steps. At the desk Blackie stopped. "I want a room for two,"

he told the clerk, and got it.

Jude put his belongings in a corner, locked the door, and the two of them descended into the street. "First place is a barber shop," Blackie told him. "Always keep up appearances, Jude. It pays. Take care of your equipment, and buy only the best."

He started to say something else and then Jude sensed the stiffening of Blackie's lean, whipcord body. Four tough looking men were approaching along the boardwalk led by a big dark-faced man. Blackie stopped and Jude saw that his hands lay close to the two heavy guns at his hips.

"Hello, Harrison," he said insolently. "How is the cow stealing business these days?"

The big man stopped abruptly, his eyes narrowing. The men back of him had stopped too. They looked like nesters to Jude; yet there was something in their appearance, the guns they wore, that proclaimed them men who could ride.

"I don't want any trouble with you, Blackie," Harrison said. "And you wouldn't try making it if you didn't know that Hickock is out of town for a few days."

"Sold your stolen herd yet?"

"I don't like that kind of talk," Harrison said harshly. "There are four of us here."

"You better go back and get some more help," sneered Blackie.

"I don't want any trouble," Harrison repeated.

"We lost Webbly back at Gramma Creek," Blackie said. "Somebody rattled a slicker and stampeded them again. Tolson got shot. If I ever get any proof of what I think I'm going to kill you. Come on Jude."

They passed warily, like strange dogs ready to snap. Blackie didn't look back. That much contempt he showed them.

"Who's he?" Jude asked.

"Harrison. Head of the NP outfit."

"Another ranch?"

THERE was a saloon's inviting doors in front of them and Blackie pushed in. They leaned against the bar, waiting for the busy man behind it to notice them.

"No," Blackie said. "NP means Nester Pool. You see, Jude, down in our country the nesters are coming in. Most people look upon the big cow outfits as a bunch of greedy range hogs pushing out the farmers. Nobody thinks anything of a nester stealing and butchering a steer now and then. All the big owners expect it, including Travers, who owns the T4. But this gang of nesters did things a little differently. They organized, with Harrison leading them. He claims to be a farmer. He's got a few acres of land down along the edge of the shinery. But from the time Harrison came in organized stealing began. The nesters banded together and began raiding us right and left. They'd even wait until it rained hard and then shoot a cow and let her float downstream, picking up her calf and rebranding. When they got enough they formed what they called the Nester Pool, the NP brand, and drove north. Fifteen hundred head, and everyone of them stolen from the big outfits. It's organized rustling and so far we haven't been able to do a thing about it."

The barkeep moved toward them, making perfunctory swipes at the polished surface with a foul smelling wet bar rag. His eyes looked a question.

"Old Overalls," Blackie said.

The barkeep nodded, reached back of him, and placed two glasses and a quart bottle of old Overholt whiskey. He shot Jude a questioning glance.

"My son," Blackie said, interpreting it, and pouring. "My youngest of four sons. The others ran away from home when they were three and became pirates."

He placed the bottle beside Jude's glass, indicating that Jude could drink or not, just as he chose. Jude poured.

"You sure you can take it?" Blackie grinned.

"Yes."

"I forgot. Your old man makes stuff stronger than this. My mistake, Jude. Drink up, have another, and we'll go take care of some business. I have a lot of it."

They drank, had another, and went out. Blackie headed for a store. They went inside into a structure that was long and dark and whose shelves were loaded with almost every type of goods. Jude fingered the money in his pocket. They bought. They came out into the street again with their arms filled with packages. Next door was a gun shop. Blackie fumbled for the knob, found it below the packages in his arms, and they entered. They put the packages on the counter. A man in a canvas apron came forward.

"Gentlemen?" he inquired.

"Thank you very much," Blackie replied. "A man of my age and as ragged as I am seldom gets such compliments anymore. I'd ask you to tell me more but I haven't got time." he slid the heavy pistol at his right thigh from the sheath and deftly punched out the five loads from the cylinder, the big cartridges thudding to the counter. One chamber was empty; the one beneath the hammer. Jude also noticed that the front sight was filed off. Blackie said to the gunshop proprietor, "She seems just a little bit too easy on the trigger. I want you to touch up the notch just a bit and increase the pull by about a pound."

The man too kthe .45 single action in experienced hands and reached for a small weight beneath the counter. It had a hook on it. He cocked the gun and placed the hook inside the trigger guard, lifting it gently. The hammer fell. The man looked at Blackie and nodded.

"You're right, sir. A bit worn in the notches. I can take care if it. How about the other one?"

"The other one," Blackie said softly, "is going to stay right where it is until I get *that* one back. Sort of feel lost without them," he added by way of explanation.

"I understand, sir." I can take care of this in a few minutes, if you care to wait."

"We forgot the barbershop. We'll be back and pick up our packages."

THEY went out. There was a barbershop next door. Blackie was humming. Back at the creek he had taken but a small drink from the demijohn. In the bar he had poured big ones. Now he seemed to be in some kind of a devilish mood.

Jude somehow had the feeling that Blackie was spoiling for a fight. Guns or fists. He somehow realized in that moment that his "pardner" Blackie was a man of moods; an intelligent, educated man who was sneering at life and at himself.

They went in and sat down in chairs and the obsequious barbers got busy. The scissors went to work and locks of long hair fell to the floor. Jude indulged in the luxury of having his half fuzz, half whiskers scraped clean, his first shave in a barbershop. He looked over at Blackie in the next chair. What had emerged from beneath those long black, shaggy locks was one of the handsomest men Jude had ever laid eyes on.

"Just in from Texas, I take it?" Blackie's barber inquired.

"We're in from Texas, but don't you try to take it. Santa Ana tried it and look what happened to him."

The barber laughed politely.

"Bath?"

"Bath!" gasped out Blackie. "My dear man. I had a bath in every creek and river we crossed from Texas ,through Oklahoma, and even in Kansas. I've been *bath* . . .ed so much the skin is all rubbed off. I never want to see a bath again. I'm all wore out from baths."

Blackie was a devil. Jude was glad this mocking man was his friend. They got up out of the chairs. Blackie wouldn't let Jude pay. The two gunman, wearing one gun now, surveyed himself in the mirror.

"You like the job, sir?" inquired the barber.

Blackie said to his reflection in the mirror, "God, what a handsome son of a gun you are. Come on Jude," and they left. Laughter, slightly nervous, followed them. These Texans were a strange breed.

They went back to the gun shop next door. The smith had the Colt apart and was working. They went over to a rack of new repeaters, and Blackie took one down. He examined it critically.

".44-40. Try it, Jude. Not much for range but a good handy saddle gun. Ever shot a rifle?"

"A little," Jude admitted, working the new action. The lever flowed free under his strong, sure hands. This was a lot different from the old Sharps single shot.

"Put it on the counter. It's yours."

They went to the revolver rack next. Blackie slid out three or four guns, put them back, and finally turned with one in his hands. He looked at Jude. "If you're going back with us, pardner, you'd better take one of these with you. They come in handy sometimes. Unless I miss my guess we've got a first class range war on our hands. Harrison is too well organized and has got by too easy to stop his nester rustling. That is," he added, "unless I shoot the swine dead before we leave Abilene. I'll do it if I get a half chance."

Jude took the gun, a .44 caliber, realizing in that moment that Blackie was more than an educated man who laughed at life;

Blackie had the killer streak in him. While Jude examined the new gun with thrilled fingers his "pardner" was pulling down a new belt with loops for cartridges. The holster took his interest.

"Better for you to have a lighter gun. A .45 is all right. It was designed to knock a man down no matter where it hits him and it will do it. But you hit a man center with a lighter gun and—don't worry . . . he'll go down. Jude, if you ever get into a gunfight, aim for their bellies. You get a man in the belly and he'll hit dirt."

Blackie took the weapon from Jude's hands and shoved it experimentally into the new sheath. "Not a bad sheath," he said, "but you'll have to cut it away a bit to allow for the trigger guard. And get yourself a strap put on so's when you're riding it won't bounce out of the sheath."

Jude listened, all ears. He was getting advice from a man who knew his business. Blackie laid the new .44 Colt on the counter and waited until the gunsmith had returned his weapon. He tested the trigger action again, found it to his liking, and handed over the other gun. This one was all right. He slipped it into the lefthand sheath and picked up the new weapon.

"File off the front sight," he ordered. "If Jude ever gets into a lead throwing fracas I don't want him going down because his gun snagged in the holster. Savvy?"

"Yessir, I certainly do."

THEY returned to their hotel room loaded down with purchases. Jude dumped his on the bed. He knew that a new life was beginning for him. The old had been put behind. He was thrilled and yet a little sad. He followed Blackie's example and began stripping off his clothes.

"Throw those damned overalls away," the other said. "You're a cow puncher now, Jude. You won't need them anymore. We'll have to get you a good saddle too, but that can wait. Now for a good hot bath."

They took one in the hotel's bathroom, scrubbing themselves almost furiously. Blackie was singing in the bathtub, covered with lather.

Oh, Myrtle got drunk at the dance,
Oh, Myrtle got drunk at the dance,
She went to Laredo to get a new hair-do,
But Myrtle got drunk at the dance . . .
ance . . . ance."

"I never heard that song before," Jude said, watching the smooth, rippling of his friend's muscles. He was unaware of his own magnificent body.

"Neither did anybody else. I made it up myself. Jude, we're going to tear up this town tonight. I got a girl here. She was a singer in Kansas City shows but she's here now. I wrote her from the ranch and told her we were on our way with the herd. She said she'd be here. Maybe she's got a friend. Or maybe you are not interested."

Blackie leaned back in the tub and howled.

"Jude, you're all right. Yee-hoo! I'm going to kill a man tonight and then make love to the prettiest girl in Abilene. Come in—get out of that other tub. We're going places."

They got out of the tub and, because Blackie was almost drunk, they strolled down the hallway in the nude. The new clothes felt good and Jude experienced a strange new thrill as he pulled on the new high heeled boots: his first pair.

Blackie slung his guns around his hips. Jude let his new weapon lay. He reached into the now lightened gunnysack and brought out the coiled blacksnake whip. Another object touched his fingers and he brought it out too. The picture of his mother. Blackie bent over his shoulder.

"Your mother, Jude? She doesn't look like a farmer's wife."

"She was a school teacher," Jude said.

"So that's where you get the un-farmer way of talking. I noticed it from the first. I have a little education myself. What's the idea of the bull whip?"

"Got to get some new poppers for it while I'm here," Jude said, replacing the picture in the gunnysack. "I'll take it along."

He coiled the whip over his shoulder, the full twenty foot length of it.

They went out into the late evening sun. It would soon be dark.

"Wonder where the rest of the boys are?" Jude asked.

Blackie said, "Nute's probably hunting up the boss. He went to Chicago, him and his wife, to meet their daughter, and then said they'd try to get here by the time we rolled in with the herd. Come on, I'm hungry. Bet you Pokey is dead drunk already. Let's get another drink."

CHAPTER IX

THEY went into a bar and had another drink. Blackie wasn't drunk but he was "high" and feeling his oats after the long, dry (whiskey dry) trip northward. He was feeling the effects of the liquor. His mood was expansive. The haircut and the new clothes had (again) changed his mood. A man of changing moods; many strange moods. Jude drank, the bull whip still coiled over his right shoulder. Out in the street the sounds played a symphony: booted heels clumping along the boardwalks; bull whackers' whips snapping; riders jogging through the dirt of the streets that, after the rains, was neither dry nor wet. Now and then a high cowboy yell cut the air and, once, Jude heard pistol shots. Hickok was out of town and they were letting off steam. Not that it mattered. Hickock was a bad man in a gunfight, but he was vastly overrated. His reputation was riding high above his actual exploits. Reports were drifting in that that fight in the stage line station wasn't according to what Wild Bill had reported. He hadn't killed nine men with rifle and pistol and knife. One of them, a mere kid, had escaped, and his story of what actually had taken place was quite a bit different from Hickok's.

Blackie drank and looked at Jude.

"Jude, you sure can handle this stuff. I know . . . your old man runs a corn still. You're taking me drink for drink and it's showing no effect on you. Let's have another before we eat. This is my night to howl and I'm busting this town wide open."

Jude drank with him. The bar was fully sixty feet long. It was lined. Riders from everywhere; bull whackers; buffalo hunters now turned bone pickers. Four men came in. It had to be Harrison and his three followers. The big man bellied up to the bar, half shoving men aside. He wore two guns. A "nester" who wore two guns.

Blackie said, "Wait a minute, Jude," and made his way along the bar. He disappeared toward the big outhouse outside and soon came back. Harrison and his men had had their drinks. A poker game had started—apparently a big one—for men had drifted away from the bar and were gathered in a circle about it. Cattlemen playing for big stakes that excluded any puncher. The bar was half bare now.

Blackie came back. He hadn't come to Jude's side. He stopped twenty feet further along, leaving Harrison and his three dog tails between him and Jude.

"I got a bad t a s t e in my mouth," Blackie's voice came, distinctly and insultingly. "Give me an Overalls to cut it, barkeep."

He was leaning with his left elbow on the bar. He wasn't looking at the bartender. He was looking at Harrison.

"We lost two hundred head at Gramma Creek," he grinned at the bigger man. He was bedevilling him. Sneering at him. Jude felt it and he tensed. Harrison and his three men were rigid, waiting. "Stampede. Webbly got killed and Tolson got shot. I've been up and down the street and I haven't seen but four of your boys. Maybe they're across the tracks in the bawdy houses—where they belong—, and maybe it's just a co-incidence that they're not in town."

Grady came in. He had bought himself a new outfit. He was half drunk. He leaned up beside Jude at the bar.

"I'll buy you a drink before I whip the hell out of you, farmer," he said, his eyes on Jude's new wide brimmed hat, blue flannel shirt, trousers and the boots.

"Get out of my way," Jude said, his eyes on Harrisons' right hand.

The bartender came over, giving Grady the expectant look that bartenders give to a new customer. "Whiskey, single," Grady grunted. "This damned farmer is too good to drink with me because he's a pal of the T4 outfits' two gunmen."

"Get out of my way," Jude repeated.

Blackie was saying, "Those two hundred head will turn up. I hope they do."

He picked up his drink to down it and in that instant Harrison drew his right hand pistol. It came out fast. But Jude had somehow expected it and already had flicked the coils of the bull whip off his shoulder, laying them out on the floor in a twenty foot length of plaited leather. Harrison's hand was half up out of the sheath, holding the gun, when the popper sang out. Blackie's drink was coming down from his lips.

Harrison let out a yell of pain and a gun clattered to the floor. He grabbed his right hand, a red welt appearing as if by magic across the knuckles. Blackie had acted automatically. In a flash his two pistols

were out covering the others.

"You dogs," he said, grinning. "You yellow dogs."

"Here . . . here!" broke in the sweating bartender. "Cut it out, you Texans. Do your fighting outside."

Nute Shelby's tall figure broke through the swinging doorway. The poker game had ceased. All eyes were riveted upon the men at the bar, Blackie with the two guns at his hips gradually coming up into firing line. Jude with the length of blacksnake again uncoiled on the floor back of him. He was scared and so was Grady.

"Cut it, Blackie," the trail boss's voice said. He moved forward. "Get out of here."

"I'll get out when I'm damned good and ready," Blackie replied, ignoring the foreman. Then he calmly shoved his guns into their sheaths. "There were four of you this afternoon. There still are. Now throw 'em."

Two men wearing town marshal's badges converged, shouldering their way between the two groups. "All right, Texans. No fighting. Do it when you get back home. Not here in Abilene or we'll jail the whole bunch of you."

"There won't be any fighting," Shelby's voice said calmly. "They're my men and I give the orders. Blackie, you and Jude get out of here. Harrison, you stand pat until they leave. Get out, I said."

Jude was coiling the blacksnake. It was over. Grady stood with drink half poised. Jude and Blackie went out.

"I'd have shot it out with the four of them," the other said.

"I know you would have."

"Thanks for the play, Jude. That dog would have shot me without an even break. You're pretty handy with that bull whip. I'm glad you brought it along. Let's go eat."

JUDE was still filled with a strange kind of keyed up excitement, and he wondered how this handsome man beside him could apparently dismiss such a matter with a laugh. They went down the street. They ate in a cafe and Jude left the whip at a saddle shop to have it fitted with a new popper and some spares, promising to return the next day. He still had to buy a tarp bedroll and a saddle.

They walked down the street, full and contended, and with Jude feeling a bit awkward in his new boots. They didn't hurt; he simply wasn't used to the high heels. He felt a foot taller.

"Let's go across the tracks," his older companion said. "I told you I've got business."

They went across the tracks. Here the buildings were about the same, with a half curving street playing thoroughfare for the saloons, gambling dives, and bawdy houses. On one corner stood a huge place of two stories, the false fronts above it giving the appearance of three stories, its porches reaching out over the boardwalks almost to the hitching racks. Music was lapping out through the corner swinging doors playing hostage to a stream of men coming and going. A big place. One of the biggest in town.

"That's the Prairie Dove," Blackie said. "Bartender told me. And she's singing there, he said."

"I've seen it," Jude said. "I've never been in it."

"Were going in now."

They crossed the street and came upon the board sidewalk and pushed inside into a mass of bright lights, gaming tables, and a bar at least one hundred feet long. It was lined and the gaming tables, at the opposite side of the room, were crowded. At the far end was a stage with a five piece orchestra playing in a pit. Two men in derby hats were dancing, their checkered suits showing up garishly against the raiment of the crowd. Those at the gaming tables were paying no attention. Those drinking at the tables were. Jude followed Blackie along the length of the bar and took position alongside him against the wall. Blackie's eyes were not upon the performers. Their glittering depths were searching the crowd.

"No NP men here," he finally grunted. "I'd bet a hundred dollars of the wages I've got that the rest of them are out with that two hundred head we lost."

He shifted his attention to the stage, relaxing a little. Six girls came out, dancing a sort of can-can while a middle aged woman in a flowery dress sang a heart-rending ballad.

"That barkeep said she'd be here," Blackie said.

When the number ended a man with a spit curl in his parted hair and sporting a long black mustache came out on the stage.

"La-dees an' Gennlmn," he bawled

above the buzzing uproar. "Our chief attraction at the Prairie Dove, di-rect here from the east, the young su-prano of superior qualities, your favorite of the prairies, Miss Edwina Cochran."

The applause, partly polite, drowned out the click at the gaming tables. Gamblers were men who concentrated. They had no time for singers.

"Here she comes," Blackie said in an aside to Jude.

She came out, golden haired and in a long flowing dress, with enough shoulders bared to be considered daring. She made graceful, sweeping bows and stepped to the front edge of the stage just above the orchestra. She began to sing; just about the prettiest thing Jude had ever seen.

She clasped her hands in front of her. She held them out beseechingly. She folded them, clasped, over a left shoulder. She sang three songs. She retired with more graceful bows.

"Come on, Jude," Blackie said, moving from the wall.

"Maybe I'd better stay here," Jude said, half embarrassed. "You can come on back to the hotel room when you're ready."

Blackie's devil black eyes were dancing. "God, how naive you are, Jude," he laughed. "I'm not coming back to the hotel tonight. Neither are you. Come on."

They pushed their way in among the tables and made for a curtained doorway at the left side of the stage with three steps leading up. Somebody in the crowd laughed loudly. They were in the wings now and a man in a derby hat saw them. He bustled forward authoritatively.

"Here . . . you cow punchers," he snapped out brusquely. "You're always trying to come backstage and annoy these girls. Get out of here and wait till they dress and come down. Then if they want to drink with you, that's their business. But nobody allowed back stage."

Blackie's strong hands reached out, gripping the edge of the cast-iron hat. He pulled down hard. The owner's eyes and part of his face disappeared into the hard crown. Blackie's shove sent him reeling.

HE WALKED on through, into a flurry of girls and acrobats and comedians. Two belligerent stage hands came forward, saw the two guns, and didn't come all the way.

"Who you lookin' for, cow punch?" one asked.

"I'm not a cow punch," Blackie sneered. "I'm a gentleman rider of the open ranges of Texas and this is my gentleman friend. Where's Edwina?"

"Miss Cochran? It's against the rules—"

"I know. I drink whiskey and it's against the rules. I eat beef and it's against the rules. Now I come in to see Edwina and it's against the rules. Where is she?"

"It's against the rules—"

Blackie said casually to Jude, "I'll toss you to see who hits him. Five gets you five that I can knock him further than you can Jude."

Jude Gordon didn't answer. He was looking at one of the stage hands, who was edging forward. The man bore a striking resemblence to his father. He was about the same age—around forty-seven or eight, he was big shouldered and raw boned, he had pepper shot whiskers, and his breath smelled of raw whiskey.

And he said about the same thing that Jude's father had said to Blackie. "I said rules, cow punch. And if you think that because you're wearing two pistols you can come back here—you and that little squirt with you—"

That final ephithet might have had something to do with it. Jude remembered all those years when his father, in drunken rages, had referred to him as being the son of some other man. It exploded something inside his brain. He stepped forward and let go with all that was back of his wiry, powerful young body. He felt pain go through his knuckles as the man went down five feet away, rolled over on his face, and lay still. He stood there rubbing his hand while a girl screamed and Blackie began to chuckle. He reached into his pocket, hoisted one of the guns up, and brought out five silver dollars.

"You win, Jude. I couldn't have knocked him that far—*Honey!*"

It was the singer. She had come up a short flight of steps that led down below the stage and now stood there, all golden in the lights, and making Jude's heart do queer things. She was about twenty, he guessed, and never had he laid eyes on such a beautiful creature.

She gave a cry and ran forward into Blackie's arms. Jude looked at the man on the floor and at the girl in Blackie's arms

and suddenly for some strange reason, felt embarrassed again. This was all new to him and he felt like a country bumpkin . . . which was exactly what he was. He could handle a team, snap aff a rattlesnake's head with a bullwhip, hit a man hard enough to knock him five feet. But he still felt embarrassed.

Blackie still had Edwina Cochran in his arms and they were murmuring something. Jude went over to where the fallen man lay. He was mumbling and trying to sit up, rubbing his jaw.

"I'm sure sorry," Jude said. "I didn't intend to but you called me a name . . ." He was helping the other to his feet. The man swayed, still rubbing his jaw.

"I shoulda known better," he said. "I did it once before to a cowpuncher and he hit me over the head with a gun barrel. God, son, if you can hit that hard with your fist I'm glad you're not packing a gun. It's all right. Just so many of these trail drive punchers coming back here after these girls. You want a drink?"

"I've had plenty, much obliged," Jude replied. "No more tonight. I got to be getting back to the hotel."

"Hotel," came Blackie's scoffing voice, and Jude turned. Blackie stood there, his arm around the singer's waist. "Come here, Jude, and meet the sweetest little girl on the prairie."

Jude went over, removing his hat as his mother had taught him to do. He stood there in front of the singer, eighteen years old, five feet ten in height plus the new boot heels, unaware of his own young strength and good looks.

"Hello, Jude," Edwina greeted, extending a slim hand. "You're all right. Say . . . you can take care of yourself. Blackie, he's handsome! Far more than you. You going to stay here in Abilene, Jude?"

"Cut it out," Blackie's voice said. "Jude's my partner, not my rival. Find him another girl."

"I don't want a girl," Jude said, feeling his face come aflame.

"Come on down to the dressing room," Edwina said, leading the way down the steps. "It's beneath the stage. Follow me."

THEY went down. They pushed through more curtains into a kind of hallway that must have led to someplace in the back alley, and then went into a small room to one side. It was a woman's room. A dressing table with large mirrors, a big closet, doorless, for hanging costumes, a couch and chairs, and over it all the fragrance of perfume and powder.

Blackie sat down on the couch and tossed his hat at a chair across the room. The hat missed its mark and Blackie stretched out, making himself quuite at home. "Honey, you're beautiful," he said.

CHAPTER X

EDWINA sat down at the dressing table. Blackie relaxed on the couch. Jude sat stiffly on the edge of his chair, feeling ill at ease. In the hallway outside the dressing room door came the sounds of footsteps and laughter; the rest of the troop descending, a little relieved that the fracas backstage hadn't turned into anything serious. You could feel it in their laughter.

"When did you get in, Blackie?" the singer asked. Perhaps she was aware of Jude's fascinated eyes on her bare shoulders. He could see her reflection in the mirror and once, through the glass, her eyes met his.

"Today, of course, honey. You don't think I'd waste any time looking you up."

"How long will you be here?"

Blackie stifled a yawn, stretching his well muscled body out further on the couch. He felt at home, in command of the situation; he was. "How long? You ought to meet Mike Kessler who talks of stars and time in space. How long? How long is how long measured in Mike's ideas of time? Such a question!"

She prettied, turning to look first at him, and then at Jude. She seemed to be more interested in Jude. At least her glance lingered longer.

"I just asked you. Perhaps you could put it in days."

"Again a matter of time and infinite space. We had problems coming up the trail, sweet. Two hundred problems on four hoofs that disappeared. I have a hunch these problems will crop up again. Who knows?"

She turned away, to the right and her back to Blackie, facing Jude. "I met him in Kansas City," she explained. "He always talks this way. In riddles. That's what comes from having too much educa-

tion. I ask him a simple question and he answers in riddles. How long will you . . . I mean, Jude, how long will *he* be here in town."

"I don't know," Jude confessed, glad of an opportunity to relieve his awkward silence. He had been playing with the stiff brim of his new Stetson hat. "From what I heard the boys say, about a week."

He was wondering how he could make a graceful bow out and get back to the hotel. Edwina disturbed him in a way that the farm girl plowing the field had never disturbed him, and he didn't like it. She was Blackie's girl and Jude knew that he had no business thinking anything different.

"That's more like it," Edwina said. "He's different from you, Blackie. He always gets to the point."

"Never mind the point, sweet. We've got things to do. He's coming along. But three's a crowd. Four is very distinctively *not* a crowd. Savvy?"

She got up and went to the door, opened it, and disappeared into the hallway. Jude felt his stomach constrict. He wanted to get back to the hotel. He wished at that moment that he was out of there and back on the farm with his father. Blackie winked.

"Just stick around, Jude," he said.

"I oughta go look up Tolson," Jude said. "he's shot through the hip and maybe . . ."

Edwina came back through the doorway. With her was a dark young girl, very pretty, about Jude's age. She still wore her stage costume.

"This is Angelica," she said to them both. "She rooms with me upstairs," and then finished the introductions.

"Hiya," Angelica said.

Blackie had raised upon one elbow. Jude wasn't blushing but something in his mien appeared to strike the twogun rider as being funny. He went off into laughter. "Come on, let's get out of here," he hooted.

Jude got up form the chair where he had been sitting. That constriction had hit his stomach again. "I guess I ought to get out and go back down town," he said. "I . . . sorta promised to look up Tolson," he finished weakly.

It wasn't fear. It wasn't timidness . . . now. It was the picture of his mother in his gunnysack. Maybe it wouldn't last too long. He was a "grown man" now and a man had to live his own life. And he was on his own. He rose. So did Angelica.

She was just a little bit indignant. After all, she was the one who was supposed to go on and sing in case Edwina should be indisposed. She was beautiful and she knew it. She had to fight off the crude attentions of one drunk trail driver cow puncher after another, and none of them ever had received any favors. And when she could be induced to be nice to a friend of Edwina's, and this lithe, good looking young cowboy finally came along . . .

The knock, hard, short rapping, and professional, came on the door. Jude was glad of the opportunity to move . . . anything to get away from Angelica's lovely but accusing eyes. He opened it.

It was the stagehand Jude had knocked down. He grinned a little and said, "Hello, cowpunch. Somebody here." Nute Shelby pushed through the doorway. He was followed by Mike Kessler, the limping Joe, and Peanut, the day wrangler. Peanut stood rigidly, and in this moment he didn't look like a horse wrangler. There was dignity and a cool aloofness in the way in which he slid his still square shoulders up against the wall beside the doorway. He was an officer now.

They made an incongruous group. Edwina, throwing questioning looks from one face to the other; Angelica, feeling half superior to them all, but still with that warm feeling within her when she looked at Jude, he was that handsome; Blackie raising up on an elbow, again, a question in his black eyes; at these cowmen, bursting into the dressing room of a singer below the raised stage of an Abilene bar and gambling place.

And Mike . . .

"Ahhh . . ." he said, "perfume. Bees and flowers. Lovely ladies. Thee call of thee opposite sex. Life, thou has did me wrong, thou has did. Sweet perfume. Methinks I like it. Ahhh . . ."

BLACKIE was up off the couch now. He was looking at the trail boss. "Let's have it Nute. How'd you find us here?"

"Made the rounds of the bars. Asked questions," was the curt reply. "Barkeep said a man with two guns and a younker came up here. We barged through. We're here."

"All right, you're here. Now what?"

"Tolson is dead. He bought himself some crutches when he got in town. I traced him from one bar to another. He was limping around and doing all right, but I wanted to be sure. Then he started across the tracks. Somebody got him there. In the back. Maybe they were afraid there'd be an inquiry when we got in town and wanted to keep him from being a witness. All I know is that his body is down at the undertaking parlor. Come on."

He went out. The others followed, Jude and Blackie the last. Angelica's eyes met Jude's.

"Yew comin' back?" she asked archly. "I got to go down now and mingle with the customers but I wish yew'd come back."

"No," Jude said.

"Yes," Blackie said, s h o v i n g him through the door in a goood natured manner. He'll be back with me."

Mike tucked Angelica beneath the chin. "If there's anymore like you around, Honey, save me about a half dozen."

"Yew sure that'll be enough, you smart cowboy?"

"For awhile. A dozen later."

Nute Shelby's hard voice came down the hallway. "Come on, men."

They followed down the hallway, Edwina with Blackie. "Angelica and me will have to do a couple of more turns on the stage and then we'll be through. We'll wait for you."

They filed up the steps, across the now deserted stage with its drawn curtain, and down through the curtained doorway again. Somebody said, laughingly, "These trail herd Texans don't waste any time, do they?"

The group of them stopped, bunched up, at the bar. Peanut said, "I've got to get thet Buggah outa jail."

"What did the town marshals say?" Blackie asked the trail boss, as they ordered

"About Tolson? About what Hickock would have said if he was in town. Another trail herd puncher killed from another Texas trail herd crew. They just shrugged. I guess I can't blame 'em. They're trouble stoppers, not detectives."

They drank and went out, led by Shelby. They clumped down the boardwalk. Their boots echoed hollowly in the night. The fresh plains air felt good to Jude's face. He realized only then how hot and flushed it had been, Angelica . . .

He had never had too many ideas about life and love. He remembered the farmer girl and some instinct had told him that even though loneliness and hunger out there was extremely trying it still wasn't an excuse to find antidote; it still wasn't right. But this was a raw, hard life and he no longer was a boy. He had saved Blackie's life with the bull whip and he was heading south to what he knew were lonely ranges where there were no women. And, anyhow, he didn't ever intend to get married. Just work hard and . . .

Angelica . . . He wanted to go back and yet he didn't. He was making excuses.

"What now?" Blackie asked Nute Shelby.

"Spread out and make the rounds of all the saloons. Drift in and see if you can see any NP punchers. Ask questions as to when they came in. They're drinking and talking. Some might boast and let a few words slip out."

"I've only seen five or six so far," Peanut's voice cut in. "Wheah you think the othuhs are?"

Nobody answered. They were cutting on down past more saloons now.

"The old man get in yet?" Blackie asked.

He and Nute were leading the others. "Yes," curtly, "on the late train. They're put up at the hotel."

He named it. It was the same hotel where Jude and Blackie had their room.

"The kid get in with them?"

"Yes. They got some fool idea about going home with us. Sounds foolish to me, but he's the boss. Says he feels a lot more at home in a wagon or on horseback than on a damned stage."

NUTE then stopped. The others in the little group stopped too. The trail boss said, "You're about all that's left sober out of the bunch. The others are over in the bawdy houses. Grady's around town somewhere. If you run into him tell him what to do. Meet me at the hotel in one hour and we'll compare notes."

"All right." Blackie speaking. "What did the old man say about that two hundred head?"

"Nothing. Got to expect things like that on a drive. We picked up a few strays on

the way up. I insisted on an actual count. Twenty-eight hundred and forty-one head. They'll rebrand before shipping. These buyers ain't too particular as long as they can get beef. Mike, you take this first place and then spread out along the street. The rest of you the same. Meet me in an hour. I'm going to the hotel and wait."

Mike was slim and blonde and about twenty-six. He stood beside Jude and eyed the inviting doors of the saloon. "And to think," he murmured, "that I might have become a scholar. But now I've got to go into a place where that vile stuff known as rotgut, red-eye, alcohol, and plain panther piss is being sold to poor innocent cow punchers. Tsk . . . tsk . . . tsk! Coming in for a drink, Jude?"

"I'll help you work the street," Jude answered.

They disintegrated. Jude went in with Mike, who promptly headed for the bar. Jude left him there. He worked in and out of one saloon after another and finally found himself back on the main street. There was a kind of lean-to dive built alongside of a much larger building and Jude went toward it. He didn't go in. He headed for a side window. He knew none of the NP outfit by sight, except the four who had been on the street that afternoon, but he cut around to the side and looked in.

At the bar, drinking with Harrison, was Grady.

Jude went in. He worked his way along until he came to a spot some ten feet away. He ordered a drink, hoping to listen. But the buck-toothed puncher had spotted him. He sneered and turned slowly. A painted woman, all of thirty-five, came up and slid a familiar arm around Grady's waist.

"Hello, farmer," Grady sneered again, his arm tightening around her.

Jude said nothing.

"He's a nester that hooked himself onto the outfit to get a few square meals," Grady explained in a loud voice. "A cheap, whiskey selling farmer."

Harrison had turned slowly. His right hand was swollen and had a light bandage around it. There was nothing wrong with the *left* one dropping down to his left hip in a casual sort of way.

"The bull whip kid, eh?" he grunted. "You made a mistake coming in here, younker. The worst mistake you ever made."

"I'm going to beat his head off," Grady sneered, pushing himself away from the painted harridan who clug to him.

She clung the harder. "Aw, now, Texas," she protested. "You don't want to do any fightin'. We got lots of things to do."

"We'll do 'em later,' Grady said.

Harrison's hard voice cut in. "Hold it, Grady. I'll take care of this."

Jude had picked up his drink served by a wooden faced bartender. He moved forward toward them. He was unarmed and he knew what was coming. And for some strange reason he felt no fear. It might have been the drinks . . .

He stopped three feet from Grady. Men were not paying too much attention. They had noticed and gone back to their talking. It was a hard, brutal, tough place.

Harrison said, "Too bad you haven't got your bull whip with you, kid. This hand of mine won't be much good for another couple of weeks. And men don't do that kind of thing to Jim Harrison. It's out for you."

Then a voice came softly from back of them; a voice that Jude knew all too well. Blackie!

"Not yet, Harrison."

HARRISON turned and froze. Grady's mouth was open in fear and stupidy. His slow brain was trying to absorb the new turn of events. "You rat," Blackie said. "I don't mind a man stealing a few cows now and then. I'd do it myself if things shaped my way. But a man don't turn coyote on his *outfit*. He sticks by them. Jude, he was going to take you. He can still do it, if you want. But Harrison is not going to use that one good hand of his. It's up to you."

Jude pushed his farm hardened young body away from the bar. "I think I got a good hunch who rattled that slicker and maybe shot Tolson that night. Maybe finishing up the job tonight. I'll bet that Shelby won't have you on the ranch anymore."

Then he lunged.

CHAPTER XI

THEY came out into the street ten minutes later. Blackie paused and looked back. He was still laughing. Grady was down on the floor, being pulled up by

the harridan, and Jim Harrison, head of the Nester Pool of cattle rustlers, had not moved. Jude wiped at the blood at his nose again, using a sleeve of the new shirt, and again Blackie's strange, uncomprehending laugh filled the darkness.

It had been quite a fight.

"By God, Jude, you surprise me more and more all the time," the older man said, a little more seriously. "Grady outweighs you by a good twenty pounds. He's all muscle and no brain and yet you took him. He knocked you down twice but you kept coming back for more, quick as a cat. If you could learn to throw a gun as naturally as you use your fists, you'd be a young holy terror."

"I'll make out all right," Jude said. "He said he was going to lick me. I gave him his chance."

"He had his chance all right. So did Harrison. You notice how *he* stood fast and didn't make a move. I was hoping differently. He knew I was hoping differently. I was aching for him to make a move. Someday I'm going to kill that moron and I wanted it tonight, but he wouldn't make a play. Come on, let's go across the street to the hotel. Nute'll be waiting."

They went across, their boots plodding into the dirt. Jude swerved aside as a buggy drawn by a span of bays trotted past. The lobby was inviting and they went in. None of the others of the outfit had yet arrived. But there were three people with the trail boss.

Jude didn't have to look at the short, wiry man, the buxom woman sitting on the cowhide lounge beside him, and the impatiently pacing young woman in fashionable clothes to know that this was the T4 owner and his family.

"So that's what she look like?" came Blackie's murmured voice in Jude's ear. "She'd just left for the east when I joined the outfit."

"She's sure pretty," Jude observed.

"Yeah, and she sure knows it, too. But I want that. Im going to have it."

Jude threw a side glance at his companion. There was s o m e t h i n g hard in Blackie's face; something that was almost brutal. Jude thought of Edwina the singer and said nothing as they went over to the others.

Harry Travers was in his late forties, his leather like face showing the years he'd spent against the sun and under the stars. He'd probably fought in the Civil War too, Jude thought; like Peanut. He'd married his wife when she was seventeen. She hadn't been buxom then. She was now, and still in her thirties.

Introductions came first, Nute Shelby doing the honors. Nell Travers acknowledged them with a brief extension of a hand and a briefer nod, and resumed her restless pacing, something in her mein saying that she was forgetting her heredity and remembering her environment of the past year or so. She acted in a too casual manner that was almost indifferent, though she did glance at Jude's left eye, which persisted in streaming water.

Grady had landed a good one there during the fight. The skin area around the eye probably would discolor for a week or so.

"Anything to report?" grunted the foreman.

"Nothing on Tolson or the NP men," Blackie said, and then gave details of the fight across the street. "Grady was right there, drinking with Harrison, friendly as could be. Harrison's hand was bandaged where Jude cut it with the bull whip when he tried to draw on me, but there wasn't anything wrong with the other one. He wouldn't draw. It was the second chance today."

"You'd better put those guns away before you end up in trouble," Travers cut in in a voice that was strangely soft, part drawl.

"Not while Harrison is packing his. That all, Nute?"

"That's all."

Blackie turned to Jude, who somehow had the idea that part of Blackie's conversation had been for the benefit of Nell Travers. She had picked up interest enough to stop her impatient pacing.

"In that case, I reckon we'll be going," the twogun rider said. "Miss Travers, glad to have met you. See you later, boss."

Jude hesitated. "I think I'll go upstairs and—" he began, but Blackie's hand clasped him around the back of the neck and gave him a good natured shove.

"You're going upstairs, all right," came a soft laugh in Jude's ear as they headed toward the street again. "But not here."

And in that moment Jude realized that

Blackie had a strange hold over him. He didn't understand why. Perhaps it was because this devilish man had befriended him; perhaps because of the man's fearlessness, the two guns he wore. Jude went with him.

"Only one thing puzzles me, Blackie," Jude said as they headed back toward the Prairie Dove. "You got education. I'll bet you've got more than my mother gave me. So I can't figure you punching cows for thirty dollars a month. It just doesn't add up.'

"It adds up plenty, pardner. A man has to get the lay of the land before he starts operating. I got it. I've got big plans . . . and they don't include busting my insides out topping frisky bronks on cold mornings. You stick with me and you'll be rich."

THEY entered the Prairie Dove again. It was still early. Jude saw Edwina fencing off laughingly the clumsy caresses of a half drunk cow puncher, and some kind of a sharp jealousy shot through him. Blackie said, "Come on," and headed for a roulette table. A few desultory players were betting but there was little interest. They bellied up and Blackie reached for his money.

"Got those two silver dollars left, Jude?" he asked, grinning.

Jude brought them out.

"Then get on me. I'm steaming. We're going to roll."

He began to play the red and black and Jude, betting a dollar at a time began to collect his winnings. Presently Blackie began to plunge. Jude followed him, taking in nine to one winnings. Sometimes they lost but usually they won. Blackie was plunging more. Once he bet ten dollars on the number thirteen and hit it on the nose. He looked sideways at Jude and grinned.

"You should have rode with me, Jude. I told you I can't lose."

They played on, and presently the dealer began to look worried. Jude was three hundred and forty dollars to the good and Blackie must have had close to eighteen hundred. They were using chips now. Five dollar chips. The dealer glanced over his shoulder as the two cow punchers raked in another killing. Jude saw his nod in signal to a hard-faced man who looked more like a salesman than a gambler.The man came threading through, shouldering his way past players.

"I'll take over," he announced.

Blackie paused, leaning over a pile of chips he was busy stacking. "Yeah?" he said, his eyes narrowing.

"What's wrong with the other dealer?" Jude asked.

The new man shrugged. He was hard-faced, hard-eyed, and there was a bulge in the right sleeve of his white shirt. A hidden derringer.

"Dealers have to be relieved," he said curtly. "One hour on, thirty minutes off to sit down."

"We haven't been playing an hour."

"House rules, cowboy. Take it or leave it."

"I'm taking it," Blackie said.

The dealer spun the wheel and then spun the ball in its groove, in the opposite direction. Blackie had put one hundred dollars on the black, Jude, something warning him, didn't bet. The dealer had his hands on the table now, fingers beneath the edge. The white ball dropped into the red. Blackie bet on the black once more and once more it was red. One hundred dollars a throw. Four more players were with them, betting from one to five dollars. Jude wasn't long in realizing that it now was a game between the dealer and Blackie. He left his chips lay where they were stacked.

Then Blackie made a four hundred dollar bet on the red. The dealer leaned forward over the table, hands resting on the edge of it, fingers out of sight below.

Right at that moment two things happened almost simultaneously. Blackie did a dive to the floor and looked beneath the table; and the dealer jerked back his right hand, slapping a .41 derringer into the palm.

Blackie had merely gone down on one knee and Jude's yell of warning caught him.

A gun roared. It roared twice more. Blackie, half up across the table, held the smoking .45 in his right hand as the crooked dealer went down on his back, shot three times through the chest. Bedlam broke loose. Men yelled and dived for cover. Others stood frozen, too startled to move. Blackie straightened and, still gripping the pistol in his right hand, went around back of the table as the two marshals came plowing their way through the

Blackie's left-hand gun roared in Jude's hand—

and the heavy .45 slug smashed into Harrison

crowd.

Blackie stood astraddle of the dead dealer's body. His other gun was out now. His black eyes were blazing as he faced the two lawmen.

"Hand over those guns, cow punch," ordered one of the marshals, advancing. "You can't get away with that in here. This is Abilene."

"This is Texas, mister. I can get away with it. He drew on me with a sleeve gun. It's here on the floor. And come around here and take a look at these fancy little gadgets under the edge of this table. Nice bunch of skunks you've got here."

ONE of the other players had gone down beneath the table. He came up, fighting to get to his feet in the close packed crowd. "Men," he called out loudly, "this wheel's crooked.I call on you to witness it. They played the law of averages until these cowmen began to win. Then they slipped in a crooked dealer to get back their lost cash. This finishes the Prairie Dove. It's a crooked layout!"

The marshals, a little less belligerent now, came gingerly forward. They went beneath the table and looked. They came up. They looked at the dead man on the floor, saw the derringer, and heard the rumbling mutter of the crowd. The rest of the gaming tables were deserted. One of the marshals looked at Blackie.

"All right, cow punch. Self defense. I wish Hickock was here."

Blackie said, "Pick up your chips, Jude, and let's cash 'em in. I'm taking a few hundred from this dealer's rack to make up for those last bets. Come on."

They shouldered through a path respectfully opened for them and went across to the wall opposite the bar. Back of a wire cage, a shotgun guard in a high chair above him, was a slender man wearing a green eyeshade and black "garters" on his shirt sleeves above the elbows.

Blackie shoved his hat over the counter, turning it upside down. A stream of chips cascaded out. One rolled off the counter and struck the floor. Blackie's black hair gleamed in the yellow glow of the wall bracket lamps and his black eyes were still brighter.

"Pay off," he ordered.

The dealer reached out with slender fingers and they did magic to the chips, separating them into various colored piles. He riffled the stacks expertly, said, "eighteen hundred and fifty," and reached below the counter. Blackie said, "nineteen hundred and fifty, you crooked son of a gun," and reached through to grasp the dealer's wrist. He twisted it hard; brutally.

Jude had laid his own small pile on the counter to be counted. The interior of the Prairie Dove had done a startling transformation. Men were moving out of the front doors almost in a solid mass while two men carried the sagging body of the shot down dealer out somewhere into the road. The stage show had stopped, the curtain down. The place was almost deserted. Somebody said, "This means the end of the Prairie Dove. Too bad."

"Too bad, hell!"replied another's voice. "Any house can win on percentages. Anytime they won't let a man with a lucky streak take out a few dollars they ought to go out of business. Serves 'em right. These trail herd men're spending thousands of dollars every month in places like this. They oughta get a run for their money."

A few men still lingered at the one hundred foot bar. The dealers at the deserted gambling tables stood watching, uncertain and confused. Nothing like this had ever happened to a gambling place before. It was fantastic. Nothing else could describe it.

Blackie had let go of the dealer's wrist. Jude turned. He saw Harrison and he saw Grady. And he saw Harrison's left hand going to the pistol. Then Jude's actions became automatic. Some strange impulse he didn't understand caused him to reach for the pistol at Blackie's left hip. It came free easily from the worn holster; far more easily than he could ever have imagined. He spun with it in his hand as Harrison's gun roared.

Jude didn't know how to shoot from the hip. That much he had learned from firing the old Sharps. A man trying to hit a target didn't shoot that way. He took careful aim.

Jude lined the sights of the heavy .45 straight with Harrison's belly and pulled the trigger, remembering what Blackie had told him.

THE gun roared. The barrel kicked up because he had been holding the weapon too loosely. He was unaware of

Blackie wheeling, the other gun out, staring. Harrison was going down in a lazy sort of way. The heavy bullet, catching him in the throat, had flung him back against the bar by the sheer power of its shock, and the head of the NP rustler pool was half falling, half sliding as he went down. His bandaged right hand made a kind of thudding sound against the brass rail of the bar as he came to rest face down in the thin film of sawdust and laid still.

He was dead. Grady bolted toward the front door.

Blackie's quite calm voice said, "Jude, you saved my life. I won't forget. Cash in your chips while I watch the crowd."

There wasn't any reason to watch the crowd. A man said loudly that it was self defense and that the other man had fired the first shot. The two disgruntled marshals were quick too. They agreed. Jude cashed in his chips, sliding the money into his pocket. He was sick, his stomach all upset. He hadn't meant to kill a man. The action had been automatic. He had known only that his friend Blackie was being shot down from behind by a man without the courage to face him. He wasn't sure whether he had been afraid of being killed or not. He knew only that he had acted instinctively.

He was unaware that his stabbing motion, the wheel of his young body with the gun gripped in his right hand, had been as fast as a striking puma leaping from its place of concealment onto the back of an unsuspecting deer. But Harrison had fired only one shot.

"My God!" an awed voice said. "Did you see that kid move? Like a streak of lightning. I've seen four men killed in Abilene, including one man by Hickock, but I never saw anything to match it."

The two marshals were pushing back the crowd now trying to return through the swinging corner doors. "Go on," they were yelling. "It's all over. Get out of here before we jail the whole bunch of you."

A number of the girls had converged. Angelica stood in the forefront, looking at Jude.

"Yew look sick, honey boy," she said. "But you come on with me and I'll soon make you forget that. My, how you fooled me, you good looking cowboy. Come on, honey boy."

He flung off her possessing arm. "I'm going back to the hotel," he said.

He started pushing his way through the crowd. Edwina had put in an appearance standing beside Blackie. He heard her voice and Blackie's voice too call for him to come back.

He went on, out into the cooling caress of the night air, heading toward the hotel. He returned to the room where his mother's picture was still in the sack.

That night he slept in the room alone, next to Blackie's unused bed.

CHAPTER XII

EVEN in a tough trail town like Abilene the two killings had the town buzzing next morning, particularly since the Prairie Dove had closed its doors. Reports were going around that it had changed owners and would reopen again that day under "new management;" reports that caused loud and sardonic laughter. Jude got up early and went down to breakfast. One eye was discolored and when he pressed his fingers against the flesh of his right cheek the feel was spongy. He went into the big dining room and sat down at a corner table, conscious that men were staring at him. Nute Shelby was eating breakfast with the Travers family. Jude saw the girl Nell looking at him. He couldn't tell whether it was curiosity or the fact that he'd killed the head of the Nester Pool the night before in a gunfight. The buzz of conversation that had ceased at his entrance soon resumed. Jude ordered and ate.

Shelby pushed back from the table and came over. He sat down and rolled a cigarette.

"Mornin'," he said curtly.

"Morning," Jude said.

The girl brought his coffee and he finished off the meal.

"Where's Blackie?" the foreman asked.

"At the Prairie Dove, I reckon."

Shelby's eyebrows raised. "Don't you know?"

No, I reckon I don't. I didn't stay there last night."

"I see. Got all your stuff bought?"

"I got to get a bedroll, shaving outfit, some saddle and a pair of chaps."

"I'll go with you to pick up the saddle. I know what you need for work down there. When you start pulling a bogged down cow out of a mudhole you want something that

won't come apart. Got enough money?"

"I got plenty."

"Then let's get going," the foreman said, rising. He was packing his gun. He looked at Jude. "Where's your six shooter?"

Jude told him. A harsh look came over Shelby's face. "Go back upstairs and get it! I was around town last night trying to round up the boys after that fight. More NP men are reported in town and they're sworn to get you."

So that was why the foreman was going with him to buy a saddle? They went out into the street. It was teeming with the usual early morning traffic. Jude felt strange with the .44 revolver stuck down the front of his waistband. He made his purchases under Shelby's critical eye, including eight hundred rounds of .44 caliber cartridges. He got the blacksnake with the new popper and spares. By the time he finished the hotel room was becoming crowded. Shelby had gone with him. There was a new respect in the trail boss's eyes Jude was no longer a nester kid. He was one of the outfit now, and again he'd done them a turn. He'd killed the man everybody knew but couldn't prove was head of the rustler ring.

Shelby picked up Jude's new belt and broke out a box of cartridges. He filled it while Jude stacked his purchases. When they went out into the street again the lead studded object encircled Jude's wiry waist . . . and felt as though it and the six shooter weighed a ton.

"We're going to hunt up the boys and get out of here," Shelby said. "Travers' orders. The NP men are out to get us after that fracas last night. They're spoiling for a pitched battle."

"I'm sorta sorry about that."

"Don't be," snapped the foreman. "Blackie would have got him anyhow before we left town. It was in the cards, and you did us a good turn. Soon as we find the boys and I get somebody to side you, I'll go to the jail and get Bugger out. Dirty trick, putting that man in jail. He's a good hand."

"Grady's across the street," Jude replied, pointing to the lean-to gambling place and bar where the fight had taken place. Back of it was a shabby looking hotel.

"Grady won't be going back with us," came the grunted answer. "I'm firing him the minute I set eyes on him. He always was a little too friendly with Harrison."

Jude asked about the lost steers. Shelby shook his head. They were heading across the tracks for the bawdy houses. "I've got a man at the stockyards but they didn't show up. Going back we'll spread out a few miles apart and check any herd coming up," and he went on ahead to describe the markers.

"But we're rolling out of here the minute the outfit gets together," Shelby added.

They found Mike in one of the bars. He had been up all night and was happily, gloriously drunk. There was an ugly looking cut over his left eyebrow and his upper lip was swollen. He surveyed their approach and grinned happily.

"Where," he asked, "have I seen those faces before? Last time it was red whiskered geese in cowboy boots and spurs walking along the ceiling. Now it's faces. Ugly faces. The ugliest, mos' frightening faces I ever saw. My mammy told me not to drink likker."

"You're a hell of a pretty looking sight," grunted the foreman as they hauled up together.

Mike straightened from the bar. "Im a handsome man," he said with alcoholic dignity. "The most beautiful man on the prairies. Someday I'm going to write a poem about my manly qualities. Would you like me to sing you a song?"

"Come on," ordered the foreman curtly.

"I'd rather sing. Something mournful and heart-rending. About a' unhappy young cowpuncher who split his old lady's head open with a pole ax because she used up all his wages drinking whiskey."

He rocked back on his heels and grabbed at the bar.

"Get hold of his other arm, Jude," Shelby grunted. "Come on, Mike."

"But I like this place," Mike Kessler protested as they made a threesome toward the front door. "It's refined. It's cultured. Just the hight atmosphere for a gentleman drinker. And besides," he added plaintively, "they've still got two barrels of whiskey back of the bar. I know—I went around and counted 'em."

THERE was a seedy looking restaurant next door and the three rocked in. It was cluttered by a few cow punchers and a number of blowsy, sleepy-eyed wom-

en drinking coffee.

They got four cups of steaming black coffee down Mike that morning in Abilene. It didn't seem to help much. Jude reached into his pocket and brought out the money for them.

"He's sure got a load on," he grinned at Shelby.

"He'll get it off when he gets into a lather and starts back. Come on."

They rocked back into the street again. At the corner of the building Mike hauled up short, freeing his arms.

They hauled him up again and started back across the tracks. Four men passed them. One was a burly individual with a fat, sour visage above a big belly. His eyelashes were gone. The lids were red rimmed. He gave them a challenging look, made a remark under his breath to his companions, and passed on.

"Tolliver," Shelby said. "Red Tolliver. Close friend of Harrison and a mean man in a fight. Don't forget his face, Jude."

"Be pretty hard to forget it."

"Don't forget mine either," Mike mumbled happily.

They met Bugger coming across the tracks. The marshal on day duty had turned him out that morning.

"Mornin', Mistuh Nute," he said.

"Where's Peanut?" demanded the foreman.

"Ain't seen him. I just got outa that louse house ovah theah. Kept me in all night. Peanut tried to get me out but they said no suh, I stays in. So I shuh stayed in."

"Get hold of Mike's other arm. Head for that livery over there."

Bugger got hold of Mike's other arm and Shelby went on ahead. By the time they arrived he had a rented team and light wagon. They threw Mike into the back, where he curled up and promptly went to sleep. The foreman looked at Jude.

"We'll go down to the hotel and load up this rig with yourn and Blackie's stuff. Then, Bugger, you drive him out to the remuda corral where the wagon is. I hired some men to put it up and watch the cavvy for us last night." He looked over at Mike, who was snoring. "When you get out there, Bugger, you leave Mike lay and saddle up a horse. Go hunt up the remuda and cut out the wagon teams and corral them. We'll find the rest of the boys. We're hauling out of here as soon as we all get organized."

They went down to the street to the hotel and began carrying goods downstairs and piling them into the wagon. Jude got Mike over onto his new tarp and let him sleep. Bugger climbed up and swung the team around at a trot up the street. Cic came by as Jude and the foreman stood on the boardwalk. He was in pretty good shape.

"Mawnin', boys," he greeted, and looked at Jude's eye. "I been hearin' reports about you, boy. Good work."

"Cic, we're getting out of here right away to avoid trouble," Shelby told the older man. "Start rounding up the boys. You go with Jude over to the Prairie Dove to get Blackie. Tell him I said to haul out of bed with that woman fast. And you keep your hand close to your gun. The NP are after his scalp for downing Harrison last night and I just passed Red Tolliver and three others going that way. Keep out of their way, understand?"

"Me and trouble are old friends, boss."

"You heard what I said!" snapped the foreman, his eyes blazing. "Keep out of trouble. One more T4 gunfight after last night and we'll be in trouble with the marshals. We've got one hell of a reputation in this town this morning. At least Jude and Blackie have. A two gunman killing a crooked dealer and another T4 man killing a two gunman. Now get going. Seen Pokey?"

"Nobody has. He just plumb disappeared within an hour after we got in last evenin'."

SHELBY went on down the street (as Jude later found out, he went to the undertaking parlor to pay for Tolson's coffin and other burial expenses) and the two others went the opposite direction.

"I sure been hearing plenty of talk this mornin' about you, Jude," Cic remarked, reaching for his tobacco sack. "Everybody's talkin' about how that kid cow puncher plumb s a l i v a t e d Harrison. Wouldn't have meant too much if Harrison hadn't been packin' two guns and shot first."

"I'm no cow puncher," Jude said.

Cic stopped long enough to lick and light the quirly. He exhaled twin streams of smoke from his nostrils. "You will be,"

he said succinctly.

The front door of the Prairie Dove was padlocked . . . about the only saloon in town that was. They rounded the corner and went down the side street to the back, into an alley. A flight of stairs ran up to a landing that made entrance to the hall on the second floor. They clumped up and entered. All over the place was the smell of cheap perfume. It permeated the air. This was where the dancehall girls lived.

"Question is," Cic said, scratching his head with an index finger, "is which one is the domain of our romantic Blackie and his bee-utiful bride of a night."

"I don't know," Jude grinned uncertainly.

"Well, boy, I know how to find out. You stand by and catch me as they throw me out. If I come sailing out head first you'll know *thet* ain't the right one." He opened a door and peered in. "Oh, I beg your pardon, sleeping lady."

The next one brought a squeal and a, "Get outa heah."

"I begs yourn too, lady," Cic said gallantly, lifting his hat to expose a generous expanse of bald skull. "I was hunting my spare underwear. You seen 'em?"

"Get outa heah!" The voice was high and shrill with indignation.

They tried a few more with varying results. Cic finally stuck his head cautiously through a door leading to a corner room. He turned, grinning. "We struck paydirt this time, boy. Come on."

Jude gingerly followed him into a large, well furnished room with a big bed in one corner. Blackie was in it.

One of Blackie's bare feet protruded through the bars of the iron bedstead. Cic, grinning, got hold of it and hauled. Results were prompt. Blackie let out a roar and half sat up, astonishment driving the sleep from his eyes.

"What the hell?" he yelled.

Cic still had hold of the foot. "I was just showin' Jude how to pull a bogged down calf outa a mudhole," he explained blandly. "If we're goin' to make a cow hand outa him he oughta get started soon's possible."

HE HAULED harder and Blackie slid half way down the bed, pulling the covers off Edwina, who squealed and modestly grabbed for them. Blackie was struggling and cursing, the full length of his bared leg now sticking out through the bars, the foot still gripped firmly in Cic's big hands.

"Leggo, you, dammit, leggo!" Blackie roared.

"What's goin' on in theah?" came Angelica's sleepy voice.

"Leggo!" Blackie yelled again.

Cic let go. "Pee-yew," he said, wrinkling up his nose at Jude. "Did he wash them hoofs last night, Jude?"

Blackie slid back to the head and sat up, scratched his hairy chest. He yawned and reached for cigarette papers and tobacco on a chair beside the bed.

"Good morning, Jude," Edwina yawned prettily. "How's our wild, gun shooting cowboy this morning?"

"What's goin' on in heah?" demanded Angelica's voice again.

Jude turned. She stood in the arch leading to the other room, wearing nothing but a thin night gown, her young breast plainly visible beneath it.

"Oh, it's yew, Jude? How come you run away last night?"

"I was thinking about something else," Jude replied.

"Oh . . . that trouble. Yew comin' back tonight?"

"We won't be here tonight. We're hauling out today."

Blackie looked a question at Cic, who nodded. "That's right, Blackie. Travers' orders. Nute says come out of here fast and get back to the outfit."

"How come?"

"The NP's hunting trouble and the boss don't want anymore. Red Tolliver's in town."

"That pot-bellied four flusher? I'll get him too like I'd have got Harrison if Jude hadn't beat me to it." He lit the cigarette. Angelica had gone back to bed.

"You better get rolling," Cic advised.

Blackie's grunt came plainly. "We spend weeks driving up the trail just to have a little fun, and now after one night the boss says to go back. You tell him I said go to hell. I've got seventeen hundred dollars left and I'm going to spend part of it, right here. If the outfit is getting out of town to avoid trouble, then they don't need me. If it's just a matter of hitching up and hauling out then they don't need me for that either. You tell Nute I said to

go on without me. I've got some business that'll take me a few days. Tell him I'll show up in time. Jude, you put my saddle and stuff in the hotel room we had. Take the bedroll on back to the ranch. Don't leave me a horse. I'll take a stage and beat you home."

He slid back under the covers and smoked, stretched out. His two guns hung on the head of the bedstead.

"All right," Jude replied. He was thinking of Blackie remaining alone in Abilene with the NP outfit still in town. But Blackie knew his own mind, and he could take care of himself. Jude told Edwina goodbye and turned to follow Cic out.

"Jude," called Angelica's voice. "Ain't you goin' to come in *here* an tell me goodbye?"

"No," Jude said. "Goodbye."

"Well, goodbye yourself!"

The bed springs creaked as she flounced over with her back to him. Cic led the way down the stairs.

"That Blackie," he chuckled, and then grew serious. "You know, Jude, I'd sure hate to see Blackie get tangled up with a woman and go wrong. He'd make the worst road agent and all round desperado the Texas country ever saw."

CHAPTER XIII

THEY worked hard all morning getting the outfit organized, the rented livery outfit making trip after trip between town and to where the wagons were parked. The men gradually straggled in, most of them showing the effects of the night before. They hauled Pokey out in the rig, in a drunken stupor. Jude had finally found him in a hotel room, two empty quart bottles beside his bed. Pokey hadn't even changed clothes.

Mrs. Travers and Nell were going home by stage. The girl had flatly refused to make the trip with the wagons. "I reckon," Cic remarked to Jude, "that she's gone a mite uppity with a year of fancy schoolin' back east."

"Looks that way."

And there had been no fight. Word had spread around town that the two outfits might decide to shoot it out, and the night lawmen hadn't gone to bed. They and the two day men were patrolling the town, shotguns slung over their arms, grim warning to all concerned that Abilene would have law and order. Gun fights were expected and tolerated. But there would be no pitched battle. Abilene was protecting its citizens and their property.

Travers and Nute Shelby were everywhere, directing, giving orders. The wiry owner was a good man in the saddle, quick and decisive in his actions. He sold off the better part of the remuda and the two lead steers. They wanted to make all possible time on the return trip. Jude would drive the chuckwagon until Pokey came out of it and took over. Right now the cook was asleep back of the chuckwagon's seat.

Jude had put down his disappointment. That new saddle and bridle were waiting to be used. The foreman had sensed it too. He had said, not unkindly, "You'll have to handle the wagon for Pokey until he sobers up, Jude. Then you can rope you a horse out of the cavvy and try out that new rig."

He hadn't said a word when Jude had gave him Blackie's message.

Jude make a final trip into town in the rig, Cic riding beside him. He liked the older man almost as much as he liked Blackie. Cic was a range wise veteran, friendly, and with almost as much of a ribald sense of humor as Mike Kessler. And Cic was playing bodyguard for him until the outfit got clear of town.

"Let's have a final drink before we go," he suggested as they pulled up. It'll be a long dry trip back. Them four quarts I got hid in my warbag won't last long if the boys find out. I oughta get me a good padlock and chain and put on thet sack."

They went in, Bugger waiting. His trade wasn't appreciated in the bars. They stepped into the swinging doors . . . and came face to face with Red Tolliver and his men coming out.

"Hello, Red," Cic greeted amiably, though there was wariness in every line of his middle-aged body.

Tolliver looked at him without speaking, then at Jude. "So you're the nester who plugged Jim, eh?"

"I'm the nester who got in the second shot."

"Goin' back to Texas with the outfit?"

"That's my business."

"I'll make it mine. Son, you just take an older man's advice and stick with the Kansas plow handles. You'll live longer

thataway. Texas can be a plumb unhealthy country for certain people."

"I always wanted to see what it looked like," Jude answered calmly. "I reckon I can stand the climate."

"Son," Red Tolliver said ominously, "it ain't goin' to be the climate you'll have to worry about. Come on, men."

They brushed on through the swinging doors and disappeared.

"Nice friendly feller," Cic commented as they ordered.

"What's he do?"

The scar-faced man viewed that one with a glint of humor in his mild eyes. "He rustles cows like the rest of them. He's got a place over in the brakes on Double Mountain River. Supposed to own a few head, like all the others. But them cows of his breed so fast thet there's even reports the *bulls* are havin' calves too. Twins at thet. Let's drink."

They drank and Cic bought an extra pint. He went out and handed it up to Bugger. "Here, Bugger, stick thet down outa sight and don't drink it until we get out of town. Better not let Nute see it."

They drove to the store and got the final list of chuckwagon supplies and returned. Bugger took the rig back to the stable and walked the mile back to the wagons. All the riders except Mike were saddled. The cavvy was grazing southward. The outfit was ready to roll.

Jude climbed up and took the reins. Back of him Pokey groaned and turned over.

They were rolling.

THE outfit made good time that first day. Pokey came groaning out in time to fix supper. Three men were missing. Grady and Blackie and Tolson. Tolson would never come back. He lay in a fresh grave in Abilene's boothill, victim of a bullet through the back. Whoever the killer or killers had been (they hadn't let whiskey loosen their tongues enough to do any boasting. And the odds had come out even. One man down from each outfit.

Full dawn had not broken the next morning before they were under way again. Jude rode one of the gentler horses; one that didn't try to take out the kinks by pitching before it settled down to the day's work. The new saddle fitted him and the bull-nose *tapideras* felt good to his feet. Shelby had been insistent about them.

"They'll keep your feet a little warmer in winter," he had explained, "they'll save you getting an inch long mesquite thorn driven through your foot when you're busting down through the brush after a steer with its tail up over its back, and there's no chance of your foot slipping through and you getting dragged and kicked to death under the belly of a mean horse."

The prairie flowed by, the miles dropping behind. Jude watched everything the men did and mentally filed the knowledge back in his mind. Muscles he hadn't used before began to complain; but by the time they camped at Gramma Creek he was getting used to the saddle. When they pulled out next morning Jude rolled over to the foreman.

He reined up alongside. "I reckon I'll leave the outfit for a little while," he said through the dawn. "Got a little business to take care of. I'll catch up by noon or maybe this evenin'."

Shelby nodded. He had developed a more friendly attitude toward Jude than with any of the others. His manner, when he spoke, was far less curt. "I understand, Jude. Take your time."

"I won't be long."

He rode off across the now familiar country where he had hunted with the old Sharps years before, when the gun was almost as big as himself. He'd been four when his mother and father had bought the farm with her money. Many times he had speculated how a woman like his mother ever could have married a man like his father. But the place had been the only home he remembered and nostalgia was bringing him back to spend a little while in the house, to look at the writing desk in her bedroom, and even to tell his father goodbye.

The sun was up when he topped a final rise and saw the farm a half mile away. He jogged toward it and a plume of smoke began wisping up from the kitchen stove chimney. His father was up and had built a fire.

He was three hundred yards from the house when the door opened and he saw the woman, half dressed, appear in the doorway; and even at that distance he recognized her. The girl, big and raw-boned, from the next farm.

Cold anger filled him. The thought of her sleeping in his mother's bed caused his lips to tighten.

Without a word he reined over and rode away.

He didn't look back.

Shelby shot him a peculiar look when he loped up with the outfit but said nothing. A man's personal business was his own. You weren't supposed to ask questions. The outfit rolled on. It crossed the Kansas line and cut across a stretch of Oklahoma Territory. Stolid Indians rode by, sullen, hostility in their looks, but making no fight. The U. S. Cavalry had pretty well whipped the fight out of them, except for occasional sporadic raids by hot blooded young bucks. They were bitter, disillusioned, and a good many of them, the big buffalo herds gone, were hungry.

On the afternoon when they crossed over into Texas Jude was riding near the lumbering chuckwagon where Pokey sat nodding back of his plodding team. Cic and Mike Kessler rode over.

"Look at 'er!" Cic grinned with a sweep of his hand ahead. "Ain't she a beauty. You're in God's country now, Jude. The purtiest in the world."

Jude grinned and looked back to the sweep of the northern horizon behind them. "Looks no different to me than over there across the line," he observed.

Cic stared at him, a look of indignation on his bullet shattered face. He turned to Mike.

"You heard thet?" he exclaimed. "You heard it with your own ears what Jude said. It's sacrilage, thet's what it is!" He sucked in a big breath of Texas air.

"They hang men in Texas for less than that," Mike said severely. "Now supposin' you just take another look and try again. I don't want to see you get fired before we got to the ranch."

Jude took another look. "Well," he finally admitted, grinning, "come to think of it, there is a difference. It's sure more beautiful up ahead than it is back there."

"Of course it is. Any fool as wasn't plumb blind could see it. You just didn't look close enough thet first time."

"And don't ever let it happen again," Mike admonished.

AND on the following Monday afternoon they crossed the north boundary of the T4 range. It was August and the rains that had been so good to the Kansas crops had spread their tentacles down here too. The range looked good. There were mesquites growing in bunches and then in small forests. Hackberry trees threw great spreads of shade beneath which cattle stood kicking and switching at heel flies until they raised their heads and trotted away, horns held high, looking back at the cavalcade of men, wagons, and horses. Great winding gullies cut their lengths for miles where, during heavy rains, the brown, almost red water rushed down in torrents.

"The old man is plannin' to start building dams one of these days," Cic said. "Too bad for you too, Jude. He'll probably get the idea thet a nester from Kansas is plumb handy with a team and scraper."

"I'll give it a try if he wants it."

"Next he'll be wantin' to put up windmills. Thet would be somethin'. Me out there with a post hole digger boring for water like a danged gopher!"

"I hear he's going to build a new ranch house with some of that pile of dinero he got for the herd," Mike added. "Heard him talkin' to Nute about it. So maybe we'll turn carpenter. First time I hit my thumb with a nail little Miss Nellie is going to be told she can build that fancy house herself if she's so set on it. What she needs, that uppity young lady, is to be turned over somebody's knee and have her backside paddled."

Jude rode on, listening. He had sensed the quickening excitement of the men as they neared the home ranch, and he felt it in himself too. He had learned much on that trip south. He could rope his own horse now with ease and saddle up with a dexterity that told of a knack for such things. And Mike's one attempt at a practical joke had fallen flat. Jude had ridden the meek looking bronk Mike talked him into mounting one morning.

He had, as Mike put it, almost had to buy a new saddle horn on account of nearly choking it off with one hand, but he had ridden the horse until it got the kinks out.

CHAPTER XIV

THE T4 group of ranch buildings lay on a prairie rise a mile east of a big gully cutting its way north and south, its edges fringed with scrubby mesquite.

Travers, like the stolid little day wrangler, had served in the Civil War, as a non-commissioned officer under the man who now worked for him. That was why Peanut, and the Negro boy he had brought with him as a sort of boy servant, had gotten the job and was now a permanent fixture on the ranch. Few of the men knew that often at night, when the lights were out in the other buildings, the two men sat talking over the old days; night patrols, cavalry skirmishes, firing across rivers and in the timber, and how General Jeb Stuart had died. There was a close affinity between these two, an affinity that none of the men, with the possible exception of Nute Shelby, suspected. For they didn't talk.

The war was still too fresh in people's minds. It had been a bitter struggle in which more than 600,000 men had lost their lives. The South 100,000 more than the North. Four long years of it.

And the men who came out of it, men like Travers and Sutherworth, wanting only to forget and take up life anew, as men always do after wars.

So Travers had returned to Texas. Land was free, hundred of rolling miles covered with lush grass, sometimes knee high. There had been no time to bother with the branding of cattle during that four years, and they had bred by the tens of thousands; roaming the prairie and mountains unmarked and unbranded. The word "maverick" had taken on a different meaning now. You no longer recognized the ownership of an animal, or "critter", just because it bore no brand on its hip or a gotch in its ears. It was everyman for himself.

Travers had come back, found enough money to hire men who would work for almost nothing, and began his iron, down in southern Texas. But he was a plains man from the north, and when he had collected all that his men could handle and his meager pocketbook would allow he drove north to the Double Moutain country, wintering on the Salt Fork of the Brazos, living in crudely built dugouts.

The years had been hard for they were all cattle poor. Their herds roamed by the hundreds and often by the thousands, and there hadn't been much of a market until the railroad pushed its way into Abilene. That T4 herd Nute Shelby had taken up the trail was the first; and now the future looked rosy.

The main ranch house that Jude glimpsed before sundown was a structure of half mud, half stone, its seven rooms sprawled out in irregular fashion, built a room at a time through the years. It was an awkward looking place, built from no particular plan, but it was comfortable. It originally had faced the west, a long low veranda running the entire length . . . a mistake that Travers and his wife had discovered too late. For in summer the hot sun bore down and, late in the afternoon, gave no shade.

Therefore Travers, with his practical turn of mind, had gone around to the east, cut more front doors, and built another porch. The roof sloped gently, enough to shed rain, and at the north end was a huge fireplace chimney.

That was the place they passed that late Monday afternoon in August. Jude let his eyes play over the other crudely erected structures. So this was to be his new home?

Travers and Shelby had loped on ahead earlier in the afternoon and were nowhere in sight when Pokey finally pulled the big chuckwagon to a halt by one of the pole corrals and swung stiffly down.

"Whoosh!" he blew out a big sigh of relief. "She's all over fer this year!"

Jude swung down easily and unsaddled. He released his sweaty mount and left the saddle on the ground, not forgetting Blackie's admonitions about taking care of equipment. He wondered if Blackie had beaten them "home."

"I'll help you unhitch," Jude said, divesting himself of his leather chaps. He slung the gunbelt back into place again. There had been rains coming down and the new belt fitted snugly into place now. And that holster was used to the gun. He had burned up about two hundred rounds of ammunition on the way down. He liked the buck of the weapon against his palm.

The others were unsaddling and a number of men were strolling toward them. Greetings, grins and good natured banter was passing back and forth.

"Lookit the city slickers!" jeered a tow-headed young puncher.

"How was them gals?"

"Where'd you git thet haircut?"

"Go way, you prairie puncher. I been to the big city an' I ain't mixin' with no

ordinary cow hands no longer."

"Who's the new puncher, an' where's Blackie and Grady an' Tolson? Did Webbly quit? Betcha he got drunk in town an' got locked up."

"Didn't Blackie show up yet?" Cic asked a tall, lean hipped puncher, in surprise.

"Hell, no! Aint he with you-all?"

"He was supposed to be here ahead of us, on the stage? Miz Travers and the kid get in?"

"Yup. Four days ago. They're all rested up now. She's sure growed up, ain't she? Where's Tolson an' the others? Ain't they with you?"

CIC spoke in a low voice and all of a sudden he was ringed with curious, quiet-eyed men. Jude, helping Pokey unharness, caught the word Harrison. He was aware then that eight or ten pair of eyes had swung his way and were appraising him.

"So *he* got Harrison?"

"After Jim fired the first shot. He jerked one of Blackie's guns and killed him. Chain lightning, them as seen it said."

"Killer, huh? Hell, he ain't more'n a kid."

"He's old enough. He can take care of himself."

"I reckon. One of these gun throwing younkers, eh? Wal, I'm shore glad he got Harrison. That's one thorn out of our side, I reckon."

"How's things since we left?"

"Not good, not bad. There's only eight of us and we been goin' from daylight to dark, ridin' the hoofs off our cayuses and the seats off our pants. But them nesters are still rustlin' us."

"Yeah, I reckon. But them nesters are goin' to keep on til hell breaks loose on this range one of these days. Any of the boys been to town lately?"

"I was in today to git the mail," the slim hipped puncher—his name was "Slim" Connors—said.

"See anything of the NP men who went north with the herd?"

"Nope. Just some of 'em in, clumpin' around in their shoes, buyin' a few supplies. It's dam' funny how a nester can take off them shoes and put on a pair of boots and get plumb handy with a runnin' iron."

"Tolliver'll probably stay in Abilene for awhile. I got a hunch them two hundred head'll show up an' mebbe he'll have somethin' to do with 'em. Nute wanted to spread out an' try to pick up word of them on the way back, but it had been ten-days before an' Travers said let it go. I reckon he figgers thet with all the money he got fer the other twenty-eight hundred he could afford it."

They moved toward the bunkhouse and Jude, releasing the last of the four horse chuckwagon team, picked up his saddle. Joe had stopped the bedroll wagon over by the bunkhouse and had unhitched. Men were carrying their tarps inside. Jude strode over with Pokey. The cook would leave the supplies in the wagon until morning.

"Put your saddle on the fence until tomorrow, Jude," Pokey said. "Not any chance of rain this kind of weather."

Jude obeyed and they went toward the bunkhouse. It was a box shaped structure, also of mud and sand stone, a good sixty feet in length and more than twenty feet wide. Travers had built for the future on that one. He had known that his outfit would grow, and the materials for the building could be had for the hauling. They stepped inside onto a hard packed dirt floor, under a ceiling eight and a half feet high. It was cool, and the lines of bunks along the walls with tables in the center looked inviting. Men were lounging about, waiting for supper, the buzz of animated conversation filling the room.

It ceased abruptly as Jude entered. He glanced about him, looking for a bunk.

"Take thet one on the end, next to mine, Jude," Cic called. "Over there," pointing. "Throw your stuff in it and we'll go get some grub pretty soon. I'm dawg-goned hungry. My stomach is all wore out from eatin' that slumgullion Pokey called trail grub. Gawd, it was awful, boys. It woulda killed a razorback hawg."

"Then why didnt' it kill yu?" blazed Pokey in the face of laughter. "I noticed yu et *yore* share of it! I ain't never seen no man who could eat louder an' grumble louder than him," he snorted to the others. "He gits canned corn an' he goes '*slurp-slurp-slurp*' an' says he wished he had tomatoes. He gits canned tomatoes an' he goes '*slurp-slurp-slurp*' an' groans as how he likes corn. He gits fresh killed beef an'

he goes *'crunch-slurp-slosh'* an' mumbles about a goat steak he once et an' how good it was."

"Goat," murmured Cic. "So *thet's* what we had in the soup one night? I *thought* thet was a piece of its horn I was chawin' on."

"Go to hell, the whole bunch of yu!" screeched Pokey, and fled out the door.

JUDE went out to the bedroll wagon and got the new tarp, inside of which were wrapped his other belongings. He brought in the warbag and tucked it under the bunk. The straw was comparatively fresh and he unrolled the tarp, straightening it out meticulously. He was stalling for time, wanting to meet the others, but aware that he was a stranger . . . and the man who had killed Harrison, head of the nester pool.

He took off his gunbelt, hung it on a peg driven into the mud chinking of the wall, brought out his shaving outfit and placed it on a small shelf above.

"When do you think Blackie'll git back?" a voice asked.

Cic's mild laughter followed. "You know Blackie. He ain't beholden to no man. Blackie just don't give a dam' fer anybody or anything. He won about eighteen hundred over the wheel before him an' Jude started bustin' cartridges around plumb promiscuous and put two men down. How old you reckon she was, Jude?"

"About twenty-one, or two."

The men were all ears. They were womenless men, living lonely lives on the far and wide expanses of the ranges, singing their mournful songs and day dreaming; dreams in which there always was a beautiful woman—as beautiful as this singer—who would fall in love with them.

They listened, enraptured.

"I'd say eighteen or nineteen," Cic said. "About the same age as her friend in the next room that was so all sot on Jude. What was her name, Jude—thet purty one about eighteen who wanted you to come in who would fall in love with them.

"Angelica," Jude grunted, trying to appear busy with his new stuff. He pushed the leather chaps under his bunk, next to the warbag, aware that, again, their curious eyes were upon him.

He had killed "Twogun" Jim Harrison, head of the nester rustlers, he had stooped to helping the cook unharness—something no respectable cow puncher would do—, and now he had refused to make love to what apparently was a beautiful eighteen year old dancehall girl.

To the love and women starved men, this was s o m e t h i n g not understandable. A strange one, this q u i e t speaking new younker!

About that time ringing iron gave off sound from somewhere without and there was a general exodus toward the door of the bunkhouse. They clumped through and Jude went with them, his hat left behind.

The sun was down far in the west, throwing red colors against a distant mountain butte—Old Bald Knob—which was bare of grass around its rocky base. That much Jude could tell from the rocks. A milk pen calf bawled from somewhere behind him and he saw smoke wisping from the ranch house kitchen. Near it was a smaller house, where Nute Shelby lived with his wife and three children.

Mike had fallen to the rear, beside Jude.

"Where does Bugger eat?" Jude asked.

Mike grinned and rolled a wise eye in its socket. His eyebrows went up. "Bugger is a special character around here by virtue of the fact that he is slightly sunburned and can't eat with the regular punchers. But by a strange coincidence we have a Negro cook in the ranch house—a lusty looking wench not quite thirty, and a widow—who likes him. So what more natural than Bugger eats in the kitchen? I'd not be so debased as to start false rumors, but I somehow s u s p e c t that the horse wrangling Bugger is slightly enamored of the lady several years his senior. But true love does not let jail bars—no, dammit, that's not it. I guess I've forgotten."

JUDE grinned and went on, glad for Bugger's sake. He liked the Negro wrangler.

The building toward which they were heading was some forty yards north of the bunkhouse and one of the strangest looking Jude had ever seen. Its walls were not more than five feet above the ground, the roof sloping. When they arrived Jude understood why.

It was a half dugout.

The ground had been dug down about four feet and the half house built over it.

They filed down steps onto a dirt floor, into a big room about thirty feet long and more than twenty wide. Two big tables with plates and knives and forks laid out were ranged along each wall. At the rear was a big cook stove, over which another cook, apron around his waist, sweated. Pokey was giving him a hand.

They began serving huge bowls of steaming red beans, spiced with chili and beef, followed by platters of potatoes. There was canned corn and canned tomatoes, and squarely in the middle of each table, on a flat slab of red rock, stood a monster coffee pot. Jude's eyes spotted what looked like a peach cobbler on the back of the stove.

One thing about Travers. He apparently fed his men well. They took seats and began to eat. Normally they ate pretty much in silence, as hungry men do, but more than half of the outfit had just got back from the long drive to Kansas and conversation ran riot. Jude kept his silence and listened. He knew they were watching him as the new man of the outfit, judging him, probing him. The memory of Harrison was very fresh in their minds. He let his glance rove around the table and discovered that Peanut was missing.

"Where's Peanut?" he asked Mike, across the table, to make conversation.

"Up at the house. For some strange reason the boss likes Peanut. They must be old friends, or something. He eats with the family."

Jude went back to his plate and finished the meal, taking a helping of the peach cobbler, but careful not to take too much. This much he had learned about range manners. There might not be enough to go around to satisfy all appetites for sweets. Sweets were a luxury and, in the absence of alcohol, the men craved them.

They finished and leaned back, reaching for and rolling cigarettes. Then Bugger's dark face appeared in the doorway.

"Mistuh Jude, the boss man say when you-all finish suppuh you's to come ovuh to the house an' talk wif him."

CHAPTER XV

THE Travers family had been having supper at about the same time the men had been called from the bunkhouse. The owner himself sat at the head of the table, his wife to his right and his daughter to his left. "Colonel" Sutherworth ate at the opposite end.

To the men of the outfit he was "Peanut" the wrangler. In the house he was Colonel Sutherworth, a secret rigidly kept by the members of the family and Jessie, the colored cook. Two meals of the day he ate with the men, but in the evening the former Confederate officer dined with the family in the house.

The dining room was in the south wing. When Travers had first built the place there had been but two rooms. The huge north living room with its five foot fireplace of red sandstone and the south dining room. Doors had been a luxury then, so it had been practical to build a stone and mortar arch between the two.

They were dining now and Jessie came in with a steaming bowl in her dark hands. She began to serve and a touch of annoyance twisted at the corners of Nell Travers' pretty mouth.

"Jessie," she said tightly, "how many times have I told you since we arrived home that you serve from the *left* side?"

"Yassum, agreed Jessie, and shifted position. She was about twenty-eight, slightly buxom, the widow of a freighter helper who had been killed in a runaway three years before. The wagon had turned over on him. But Jessie was still slightly confused by the new turn of events. Before "Miss Nell" had gone away for a year of schooling back east the meals had simply been put on the table like the cook did down in the dugout. And now . . .

Jessie served.

Travers looked over at his petulant daughter and then at his wife. Amusement was in his eyes.

"Maybe," he said to his wife, "it was somethin 'of a mistake to send her away. If that's what they call 'higher education,' then I reckon I just don't want any of it."

"Father!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"You see. Before she went away she rode astraddle and called me Pa. Now she comes back with a fancy side saddle and calls me Father. Goddlemighty!" he swore, feelingly.

Jessie went back to the kitchen, through a curtained doorway. Bugger was busy over his plate.

"I jes' don't understand that Miss Nell

no mo'," the woman complained. "All these high falutin' manners since she got back home."

Bugger guffawed. "You-all jus' don't savvy, woman," he grinned. "You-all oughta been back in Gawgia when my mammy an' pappy worked fuh the Cunnel's folks. My mammy was a cook an' my Pappy was the butler. Mos' people worked in the fields an' you had to be somebody real 'special to be a butler. Dinin' tables a hunned foot long an' enough silvuh plates an' stuff to load down a wagon. You's jus' ignorant, thass all."

"All right, then you-all go in and serve em," snapped back the harassed Jessie. "Since you knows it all."

She started a return trip to the dining room and Bugger's guffaws of derision followed her.

In the dining room they finally finished the meal. The girl had gone to the front room, taking something from her father's desk, and returned. She came back and unrolled some paper on the table, pushing aside the dishes. Mrs. Travers looked dubious but the girl's father obviously was interested. He had spent years in the field as a soldier, more long hard years fighting the elements, a w a y from his wife for months at a time; but now the tide was turning. That trail herd to Abilene had brought in more money than he had ever realized could be made in a year. It was time to give them the things he always had planned. The range was good, their cattle roamed by the thousands despite the rustlers, and there would be another herd go up next year.

Travers bent over the plans for the new house. He loked at his daughter and chuckled fondly.

"So that's where so much of the money I couldn't spare to send you went?" he asked. "I had to borrow from the bank in Alden, and talk my head off to old Barker to get more money to get it. And all the time you were spending it on one of them fancy—"

"Those, father. Not them."

" 'Those, Father,' " he mimicked. "You were spending it on one of those fancy architects to draw up plans for a fancy house. Well, let's have a look at 'em."

He took the papers, peering this way and that, a frown wrinkled his brow below the slightly grey streaked hair. He scratched his head.

"I'm damned if I can make head or tails of it," he finally said. He raised his face and looked at the man at the other end of the table. "Come here, Colonel. You know anything about this business?"

The wrangler got up, wiping his lips with a napkin. There hadn't been any napkins until "Miss Nell" came home from school. He bent over Travers' shoulder.

"As a mattuh of fact, Sergeant, ah had some of this in college. Let's see."

"You mean you savvy all these fancy lines an' drawings?"

"Why, suttinly. It's a nice looking house. A low front veranda moah suited to the west—"

"Porch. Where the hell's the porch? I'm damned if I can see it?"

The former Colonel pulled up a chair and began to explain. Travers listened, watched, and a light of excitement came into the owner's eyes. He finally rose, pushing back his chair.

"All right," he said with his decisive way of speaking. "We'll build it. A hundred yards north of here, where the ground rises a bit higher."

"And a little further away from the other buildings," his daughter put in.

"We'll get at it in the morning. Freight out supplies from town. Colonel, I always wanted you to have a better job than wrangling, but you insisted because you said it was easier than regular punching. Tomorrow you take charge of the building. Get workmen out here. Use any of the hands you want. But we start building tomorrow. Jessie!" he called.

JESSIE stuck her head through the curtains. She wore a maid's cap and a frilled white apron now, as of the last four days. Things were changing on the T4.

"Yassuh?"

"Tell Bugger to go get that young nester kid Jude and bring him in here."

"Yassuh." her head disappeared and, presently, the kitchen door rattled.

"Jude?" Sutherworth asked.

"That nester Nute picked up in Kansas. He's a team man. He'll do the freightin'."

"Isn't that the boy who shot Jim Harrison in Abilene?" Mrs. Travers inquired.

It was the wrangler who answered. "Yes, ma'm, that's the boy. Only he's not a boy. He's eighteen, he's got a little moah educa-

tion than most of these heah cow punchers, and he's the quickest man to learn I evah saw."

Nell Travers sniffed. "I suppose he thinks that because he shot the head rustler of the Nester Pool he'll be too good to handle a freight team to build a new house. It will do him good to stay where he belongs—behind a team. And if he's any ideas that because he's being called up here to the house—"

Her father shot her a look, a glint in his eye. "If you're worried about him moonin' around you because I own the outfit, I don't think it'll cause you any trouble. I watched that kid all the way down the line. One thing I'll say for Nute—he knows how to pick men. That kid tends to his own business, he keeps his eyes and ears open and learns things, and if he don't get too handy with that gun he already can handle so fast he'll make one of the best hands this outfit ever had. Nute likes him, and that's good enough for me. You're getting to big for your britches, young lady."

"Father!"

"Call me Pa, dammit!" he suddenly roared, and then Jude's knock came on the door.

CHAPTER XVI

JUDE knocked and then opened the door and entered. He was unaware that, as far as the girl was concerned, he had just committed an unpardonable sin. She had sent Jessie to open the door for him. Jude said, "Howdy," to the Negro woman in his soft voice and looked through the arch.

"Come in, Jude," Travers called.

Jude went over to where the two men were working over the plans. He nodded to Mrs. Travers. "How are you, Ma'm? Hope you had a nice trip home."

The girl he nodded at, but did not speak. She was a lovely thing with her russet colored hair and blue eyes, but he had sensed in her impatient pacing in the hotel in Abilene, in her refusal to come home with the outfit, that she was spoiled to the point of arrogance. He was taking a more decided dislike toward her every time he saw her.

The ranchman twisted around in his chair. "Jude, these plans are for a new house we're going to build over there a hundred yards from here."

"Two hundred, father," his daughter put in. "I want to choose the location myself."

Her father ignored that one. He said to Jude, "So, son, tomorrow morning I want you and Pokey to hitch up the chuckwagon and go to Alden. I'll meet you in town. I'm going to buy two new freight wagons and start hauling supplies right away. Col—Peanut here is going to be in charge of the building. You'll be in charge of the freighters. Peanut'll tell you what to buy. What we can't get in town we'll order."

"All right," Jude answered. "Anything else?"

"That's all for the present. If you and the other freighter can get a couple of good helpers—and I'll fire any man who won't work—you ought to be able to make one round trip a day. I want you to make it, come hell or high water. We'll have a fall roundup on our hands pretty soon and I'll need every puncher I can get hold of."

"All right," Jude said.

The girl's eyes were glinting. "Mr. Gordon," she said icily, "it would be a little more mark of respect to address the owner as 'sir' or 'Mr. Travers.' And, while we're on the subject, you'll address me as 'Miss Travers.'"

"I'm not aiming to address you at all. I'm just aiming to keep out of your way," was the quiet reply.

Travers exploded with a roar of laughter. "Haw-haw-haw!" he bellowed. "That's one time you got what was comin' to you, 'Miss Travers.' You stick around this ranch long enough, young lady, and we'll soon get yore head out of the clouds and down where it belongs. All right, Jude, you tell Pokey—and you keep him sober in town."

Jude went back outside into the darkness. The rest of the outfit was strolling contentedly back toward the bunkhouse. Jude headed for the dugout and descended the steps into its cool, comfortable interior. Pokey and the other cook were busy clearing dishes.

"What the old man have to say?" Pokey inquired.

Jude told him and the cook whistled. "Trewww! A new house, huh? Dawg-gone but things will start hummin' around heah now, what with the roundup comin' on purty soon. I reckon we'll have to set

up a couple of bunk tents to house the extra hands and maybe a cook tent too. Ike, looks like we got our work cut out fer the next couple of months or longer. Jude, this is Ike."

"Hello, matey," Ike said, expending an arm tattooed all the way to the elbow.

Pokey caught Jude's questioning look. "Ike's a sailor," he explained. "He was in the Northern navy during the war. Took over for me when we went north with the herd. Got a parrot that can cuss as loud as Cic can grumble over chuck. Allus heard these sailors carried a parrot on their shoulders but never took much stock in sich things til Ike showed up. What in tarnation fer anyhow?"

"Gets lonesome aboard ship and you git tired talkin' to the rest of the bilge they call a crew. That's a fact, and you can lay to that." And to Jude: "Come over to my shack sometime, mate, and meet Admiral Big Bottom. I named him after a swab I served under on a mud scow they called a fightin' ship. The Admiral likes whiskey."

"Hell, who don't?" snorted Pokey, and cocked an inquiring eye at the man from the sea. "The Admiral—er—wouldn't have a' extra quart he could spare right handy, now would he?"

Ike glared at his co-worker. "I catch you sniffing around the Admiral's likker supply and I'll bend a Marlin spike over your bald noggin. That's a fact, mate, and you can lay to that."

Pokey promptly registered indignation. "Yas?" he sneered. "Well, just don't fergit that Jude an' me are goin' to town tomorror an' we knows who are friends are, don't we, Jude?"

"The old man said to keep you sober. Here, I'll give you a hand with the dishes. Haven't got anything else to do anyhow."

He still felt out of place because of the nine or ten men who were strangers to him. He was remembering that first night at the chuckwagon when, for the only time in his life, he had become panicky and bolted. Thought of that made him smile. He had changed much in a matter of weeks. His whole world had changed, his perspective broadening out by leaps and bounds to new horizons.

HE ROLLED up his sleeves and got busy. They washed the dishes, dried them, and put them back on the two long tables, ready for breakfast next morning. While Pokey sliced bacon the ex-sailor chopped wood and filled the wood box back of the huge stove and then prepared kindling.

When they closed the door of the dining dugout all was in readiness for the next morning.

"Like to keep things shipshape, matey," Ike explained as the three of them strolled through the night toward the outlines of a low shack not far from the bunkhouse. As cook, it was Pokey's prerogative to live by himself, not only because of his position but because the rest of the outfit didn't want him disturbing their sleep when he rose an hour earlier.

They stepped into the doorway and sound came from within.

"Bilge water!" squawked a voice from the corner. It was hoarse, raucous, and a little disgusted.

"Ahoy, Admiral," Ike greeted, lighting a match.

"Ahoy—(squawk) the bos'n, the bos'n —(squawk) man overboard!"

Admiral Big Bottom worked his way along the perch in the corner, ruffled his green feathers, and glared at them from a pair of evil, beady eyes.

Ike lit the lamp and Jude looked about the room. It had two bunks, a table and chairs, an iron bound chest in a corner. Ike went over and extended a forefinger. The Admiral looked at it as though tempted to take it off with that wicked looking beak that could crack a pecan, and condescended to extend a horny claw. He worked his way along the wrist and arm and then, using beak and claw, climbed to the cook's shoulder.

Ike went to the iron bound chest in the corner, took a key from his pocket, and unlocked the big padlock. He brought out a quart bottle half empty and a tiny tin cup.

"Bilge water!" squawked the Admiral.

"The hell it is," Ike snorted. "It's the best grog they had in town and you know it, you galley scum."

"How old is he?" Jude asked curiously.

"The swab I bought him from said he thought about forty or fifty. But I'll bet the Admiral's a good seventy. That's a fact, mate, and you can lay to that."

He came back and put the bottle and

cup on the table and Admiral Big Bottom worked his way down the sleeve again. Ike uncorked and poured, adding in a touch of water. The parrot went after it greedily. Presently the cup finished rattling. It was empty. He went back to Ike's shoulder and ruffled his feathers. Ike poured the three of them drinks and then took the bird back to his perch. He ruffled his feathers and stood on one foot.

"An' we threw the bloomin' bos'n in the ocean," he croaked.

Jude remained with the cooks for an hour or so while Ike related strange tails of sea battles and pirates that might have been true and might have been mostly fiction. Pokey yawned and Jude rose to go. From now on, he knew, he'd need all the sleep he could get.

"I'll get the team out as soon as you're through in the morning," he said. "I'll drive over and unload. Where'll we put the stuff from the wagon?"

"In the storehouse. Any of the boys'll show you where it is." He looked at Ike and licked his lips. "I—uh—seein' as how me an' Jude'll be bringin' a little somethin' back from town tomorrer evenin', maybe we could have another bit before we—"

"Go to hell!" screeched Admiral Big Bottom, and Jude went out into the pitch darkness laughing harder than he had laughed in months.

He looked up at the stars and suddenly he was happier than he had been in his life. He pulled in a lungful of the clean, cool air, and the thought came to him that Cic's remarks about Texas might not be so far from the truth after all. It was big, it was raw and lusty, and it hadn't suffered the ravages of war. There was room for expansion here if a man saved his money.

Jude went to sleep that first night on the T4, owning the biggest ranch in Texas.

THE T4 came alive before daybreak the next morning, the men scrambling out in answer to Ike's stentorian roar through the bunkhouse doorway. They ate bacon, stacks of big flapjacks made from sourdough batter, syrup, washed down by steaming cups of black coffee. Jude got his saddle and bridle off the corral fence and carried them to a long, low shed with two poled racks extending the length. This was the saddle shed, where during the night the men's riding equipment was protected from the elements. He slung it over the rack and went out to hook up. The corral was alive with nearly twenty men roping and saddling from the remuda that Bugger had brought in. Bugger would eat breakfast, sleep most of the day in his bunk rigged up in a lean-to back of the blacksmith shop, and then hang around the kitchen to bedevil Jessie until supper time.

Shelby seemed to be everywhere, handing out orders for the day. Travers showed up as Jude came out of the corral with two bridled horses and began harnessing.

"Peanut made up a list of what we'll need first, Jude," he said. "Mostly mortar for the foundation. We'll haul the rock from the foot of Bald Knob. I'm going in town in the buggy to see about some more men and I'll run into you in there. Get loaded as soon as you can and keep Pokey out of the saloons."

Jude nodded, fastening on horse collars. He finished the four, found out where the storehouse was, and unloaded. By the time he finished and hauled up before the dugout door Pokey was ready. They removed the tarp and staves that covered the bed and rattled off down past the ranchhouse. The road angled north and west, dropping in a gentle incline across the flat to a big wash a half mile below. Wheels crunched into damp ruts as they worked across. Pokey pointed south to where, a half mile away, stood a forest of trees of a kind Jude had never seen before.

"See them? That's why Travers built the ranch here. Them's Wild China. They make the toughest pole corrals a man ever built. Ain't no steer ever lived can crack through one of them pole corrals, and thet wood'll last fer years."

The road wound on, a little more to the west, and they skirted the south side of Bald Knob's tapered butte where large red stones had broken off and come tumbling down to lie in easily accessible piles. Jude made a mental note that if he was to be head freighter, then the other man was going to haul those stones. They passed through a two mile forest of green mesquites, clusters of the long yellow beans brushing at the sides of the wagon. Jude hooked one and chewed absently on it.

"Apaches down in Arizony use 'em fer food," Pokey explained. "They're good cow food too except when they're et too green.

Then they give 'em a bad case of the scours. That's the only time I ever saw a critter change color. She gits all green on the hind legs."

Alden came in sight, some fourteen miles from ranch. It's scattered buildings were sprawled on a gently sloping knoll, bare of trees. It was a much larger place than Jude had imagined. Being the only town within sixty miles, it drew trade from every rancher and nester in the country.

Harness rattled from behind the plodding team and Jude looked back. Travers swerved around them behind a span of trotting blacks, his daughter beside him. Jude tipped his hat, ignoring the cold look she gave him. The buggy grew smaller on the rutted road ahead. Pokey spat over the front wheel and wiped his "splay puss' mustache.

"She used to be a nice younker around the ranch. Regular tomboy, all over the place. Ride like a man and a dinger at ropin' a calf. But not anymore. Too many hifalutin' idees she got in thet fancy school they sent her to. But I reckon she'll git back, give her time."

"I don't like her," Jude said. "All I want to do is keep out of her way."

Pokey cackled. "Then you're sure different from most of these other cow hands. They go outa their way to git a chance to tip their hats an' say, 'Howdy, ma'm.' Little good it'll do 'em. Bet yu a bottle of whiskey thet when we git thet big house finished she'll be givin' parties an' hirin' maids an' servin' tea." He wrinkled up his nose at the last thought. "Well, I guess Travers can afford it now, He can easy put three thousand up the trail to Abilene every year. Few more years of thet an' he'll be worth a million."

He changed the subject, pointing toward a jumble of red sand stones in the square. "See thet? It's a new courthouse goin' up. Two story an' even a cupola. People got together last year an' voted ninety thousand dollar bonds fer it an' the new jail. We elected our first sheriff last year. Jim Underhill. Good man."

They were entering town and Jude didn't answer. He was staring at a man and women who had stood on the porch of the general store and stage station waiting for their luggage to be tossed down.

Blackie had come back and he had brought Edwina with him.

CHAPTER XVII

POKEY cracked the four into a trot. They rattled westward along what soon would be the south side of the square, past the workmen toiling away at the red sandstones. The walls were up about four feet. The town was a lot larger than even Jude's first estimation, close to a thousand, he guessed. At present the main business section lay on the west side of the square, running north and south, and most prominent among the buildings was the huge general store.

Pokey swung on down the gentle roll, cut to the right past a small hotel, and came up in back of the store, where a giant wagon yard sprawled over three acres of land, surrounded by a high fence. Inside the fence were new wagons and buggies of every description, and a lot of farm implements bought for the nesters but which appeared to have been sitting there in the sun and rain for quite some time.

Jude thought of the NP men. Small wonder they didn't farm. Why sweat a man's insides out plodding along back of a plow when one stolen calf, in three years, would be worth quite a pile of hard money. Multiply that by fifty head, feed what you could on your land and hide the rest in the bad country, and it beat farming.

"Whoa, blast you. Whoa, Maud!" Pokey bawled, and hauled up hard on the four lines directly at the double back doors of the store. The hub wheels hit hard against the loading platform and Pokey wrapped the lines around the set brake handle. He displayed remarkable agility in going over to the hub high platform and turned as Jude followed.

"I saw the old man's buggy out front of the store," he said in all the maner of a conspirator. "Him and Nellie are in there talkin' to Sol Martin. Sol's a Jew an' a danged fine man. Anytime the local gamblers get hit hard they come to Sol. I've seen him hand out four thousand in gold with no note signed. An' when they bring it back he won't take any interest. As long as he's got stuff on the shelves people who ain't got money can get it on credit. He don't lose any either—not even from them cow thievin' nesters. But never mind that. You can see the old man in there. Now, Jude, right next door is the back end of a saloon an' yu and me can

sorta slip in there an' pick up a drink an' get a quart. I promised Ike, yu know. After all," he added defensively, "a man has to keep his word out in this country an' I owe the Admiral a few drinks, which I can take back to him—"

"I'll get the quart," Jude cut in. "I'll hide it under the seat and it'll stay there until we get out of town on the way back."

"But that'll be two or three *hours,*" Pokey almost wailed.

"I know. But the old man said no saloons, Pokey," Jude smiled and clapped him on the shoulder.

Pokey went snorting into the back of the store and Jude dropped down the four steps at the end of the loading platform. He opened the rear door of the saloon and went in; had a drink, paid for the quart, and came back the same way. He disposed of the liquor, grinning a little as he hid it beneath the loading platform. Then he went inside.

At the northwest corner of the building Sol Martin had his office. It consisted of a fifteen foot square area surrounded by a picket fence with a swinging gate. Inside was a desk, a huge iron safe six feet high and resting on castors, filing cabinets, and three chairs built from willow wood and covered with iron hard, dried cowhide.

Sol and Travers were sitting inside, the merchant going over his account books. Nearby stood Nell Travers, examining a bolt of goods being unrolled on the counter by a woman clerk. The merchant was about sixty, with a clean shaven, slightly red face topped by the only pair of square spectacles Jude ever saw.

"I got it at eight thousand, seven hundred, forty-one dollars, and eighty-six cents, Harry," Jude heard him say. "Does that check with your figures?"

"You know dam' well, Sol, that I never keep any figures," the T4 owner replied. "Too much trouble, except in a tally book. Yourn are good enough for me."

"That includes the six hundred cash you wanted for Nellie," Sol added, and Jude forced a grin as he looked at the girl. She might be "hifalutin' " now but a lot of her schooling had come from money borrowed from Sol Martin's big safe.

"That include the interest on the loan?" Travers asked.

"I'm a merchant, not a money lender, Harry. If I've got it—and there have been times when I didn't—you boys can get it. There have been times when I had to send my son with signed notes to pay for what my string of freighters brought back, but somehow we've all managed to pull through. And now this new railroad in Abilene, with the east crying for Texas beef. I see good times ahead for a few years."

"So do I. Lordy, the prices they ain't paying in Abilene! Nute said three groups of buyers came loping out to start bidding against each other."

The merchant leaned back in his chair and pushed the square, old fashioned spectacles up into his shock of hair. He nodded, smiling genially

"That's what makes good business, Harry. Bidding."

"That's why I want to do some more before the bidding starts, Sol. This new house is costing plenty, but I'll still have some left. I might need more."

"So?"

"Hensen and his wife want to sell out over on Duck Creek. He told me so before I left with the herd. My north boundary meets his south boundary, and we've never found it necessary to keep any line riders between us. When my boys in the line camp see any of his stuff they throw it back north. His does the same with my T4 brand. He's running about a thousand head now, but says his wife an' him are getting old and wants to get out. Claims it's too late for him to start driving up the trail to Kansas. He's cattle poor and the damned nesters are stealing him dry. I can get the outfit pretty cheap. I might need some more cash." Significantly.

JUDE pretended to be examining a group of bridles hanging from a rack, the raw, yellow leather feeling good to his touch. This was the kind of thing he wanted to learn. He was listening for facts and figures. At the counter Nell said, "I'll take the whole bolt. My father will pay for it. Now let me look at that one over there. I want something to make suitable window curtains for the house. It looks so bare."

"You can get it, if you need it," Sol Martin said. "But don't spread out too thin, Harry. I made that mistake once. You see, I'm an immigrant from Europe and Martin isn't my name. I changed it to Martin because nobody in New York ex-

cept the immigrants could pronounce it. I saved, slaved, started small, and grew. I grew too far and had to start all over again. I got a good chance to sell out and kept coming west, trading as me and mother came. I made money and I had confidence in the future of this country. But this Hensen deal looks good. He's a good man. Buy and I'll back you all I can, if you need it."

Travers started to reply but Jude didn't hear the answer. For at that moment a pair of soft hands slid around from behind and covered his eyes and he felt the imprint of a kiss on his cheek. He turned.

She took his cheeks between his hands and kissed him squarely on the lips.

"Jude!" Edwina exclaimed delightedly. "You gun throwing cowboy."

Blackie came forward, grinning, hand extended. They shook, Jude aware that Nell Travers' eyes were open in astonishment. Just what other expression might have been on her face, or what thoughts were in her mind, he didn't bother himself with. He felt better now.

"Hello, Jude," Blackie grinned. "We finally got here. Rode all night on the stage to make the last lap. How's things on the ranch?"

"All right, I guess. We got back fine. No trouble except the usual amount of rain and wind. How's Angelica?"

Edwina laughed and so did Blackie. He was wearing a new suit, but the two heavy pistols showed their bulge beneath the coat.

"She sends her regards and threatens to follow us out here," Edwina smiled. "I think you kind of took her heart away from her, Jude. Shame on you, you handsome cowboy."

This hadn't escaped Nell either. Blackie went over, doffing his new hat, and spoke to her. A man strolled casually by, toward the back door, and Jude said to Edwina, "Excuse me."

He went out the back door. Pokey was fumbling frantically beneath the wagon seat. He turned, his face growing red.

"I—uh—think I lost my jackknife," he mumbled. "Some of the boys is whittlin' out on the front porch an' I sorta couldn't find it."

"Take mine." Jude brought out the new one he'd bought in Abilene. "It's razor sharp."

Pokey glared, slammed the knife into his pocket, and stalked indignantly back into the store, head held high. Jude followed him inside.

Travers came out, after settling up with Sol Martin, and they got busy loading the wagon with two new tents for the extra men, plus the other things Peanut had required. Travers disappeared, ostensibly to hunt up some men. Two of Sol's help hooked onto the two huge new freight wagons and rolled them up near the big gate and began greasing the axles. They stood high off the ground with broad iron tires.

"We'll need 'em," the sweating Pokey grunted, heaving at a sack. "Just you wait until we git caught in a downpour. Them wheels'll go clean to the hubs. I know. Yu got yu're job cut out fer yu, Jude."

Noon came. They broke off long enough to eat. By that time two teams of four each, bought from the livery and complete with harness, had been hooked to the two new wagons and had disappeared toward the lumber yard. At one o'clock the loading was done. Jude wiped the sweat from his face and straightened. He removed the grain nose bags from the horses' heads, bent and retrieved the bottle beneath the loading platform, and got ready to crawl up for the return trip.

THEN Blackie and a big bluff man of fifty came through the rear door. The man was about fifty or fifty-two and looked like any ordinary cowman except for the star on his shirt front. Jim Underhill, the first sheriff.

They shook hands at Blackie's introduction and Underhill's penetrating but good natured eyes took in Jude, the pistol at his right hip. "So you got Harrison in Abilene?" he commented. "Blackie told me all about it, son. Long as you wait for the other man to shoot first you won't have any trouble with me."

"I don't expect any trouble, " Jude said. "But if it comes I reckon I'll have to judge accordingly."

He looked at Blackie. "You coming back to the ranch with us?"

Blackie grinned shaking his head. "Jim's just offered me a job as deputy sheriff, Jude."

"Taking it?" low voiced.

"You bet I'm taking it. No more getting a shirt torn off by a steer's horn going down in a stampede for Blackie. I'm through with the cow business, Jude. But

I'll be out to get my stuff."

Jude put down his disappointment, hiding it beneath a poker face. He said, "Sounds like a good job. I wish you luck."

And in that moment he knew that his and Blackie's trails had parted. They would see each other at intervals and still be friends. But Blackie was a lawman now and, too, there was Edwina. Jude remembered what his friend had said in the hotel ("I want that.") when he looked at Nell Travers. He wondered if they were married.

Jude stuck out his hand again. "Well, I guess we'd better get going. I'll run into you now and then, I guess."

"Yup, we better get goin'," Pokey put in, his eyes instinctively glancing back of the seat. He crawled up and unwrapped the lines. Blackie stepped forward.

"One word of warning, Jude. The NP outfit with Red Tolliver leading left Abilene the day before Edwina and me took the stage. They'll be in in a few days. Watch your horizons, boy."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE T4—the T was for Travers and the 4 for the four years he had spent in the Civil War—became more of a construction camp than a ranch in the weeks that followed. Fifteen workmen were housed in the two new tents and under Peanut's crisp supervision the big foundation of red sandstone took shape in what looked like irregular squares and the walls began to rise. Jude worked from daylight until dark, making daily trips to Alden, loading and unloading, loading and unloading . . . his life seemed to be made up of nothing else. He ate hungrily at all times and his body, which had been hard enough, took on weight even while it became lean and tough. He saw Blackie nearly every day, his friend now wearing the badge of a deputy sheriff. And from all reports Blackie was making a good one.

He and Edwina were not only openly living together. They shared separate rooms in the two-story hotel on the north east corner of the square. The north side itself housed a line of gambling places and saloons and two restaurants. Jude wore his gun all the time for Red Tolliver was back and Red was openly boasting. In the store silent, surly looking nesters — men who wore plowmen's shoes while in town and then shifted to riding boots—stared hard at him and gave him a wide berth. Jude went his way, wary, quiet, and never turning his back on a man. Reports drifted in that Balckie had laid down the law to Tolliver. And Blackie was a bad man to deal with. Jude heard other reports that Edwina was going to open up a new place, a general gambling hall and saloon, where she would sing. The town was growing, the second story of the courthouse now up and the roof going on. Men were drifting in. You could hear any kind of rumors: that the cowmen over a hundred mile radius were hiring "exterminaters" to take care of rustling nesters: that the nesters were hiring killers to take care of the big owners.

Jude went his way and the building supplies piled higher and higher beside the newly erected structure until there came a day when Peanut said they had about enough.

"Anymore we need can be taken care of without too much trouble, ah reckon, Jude," he said that late afternoon as Jude and his helper finished unloading. "We're startin' the fall roundup next week anyhow an' you'll be needed."

Jude nodded at the little man and watched the helper lead the teams away. He reached up into the big wagon and brought down his .44-40 repeater from the wagon seat. He had carried it with him almost every day since he began hauling. Blackie had said for him to watch his horizons. But Jude had made every effort to keep the weapon hidden. Nobody knew that on those trips the loaded gun lay within reach at all times while Jude's eyes kept a sharp lookout toward every ridge and through every mesquite clump; his helper was a stolid, middle aged Mexican who ate noisily, worked like a giant horse, and told nothing. His only diversion was in teaching Jude Spanish. And Jude himself was not aware of the change that had come over him. He was quiet, seldom speaking unless somebody made a remark to him; he didn't realize how quiet he had become. But the men of the outfit knew. They talked among themselves about the reports drifting around. The Nester Pool had sworn to get this nester kid, and this kid who attended to his own business and kept his eyes and ears open was a dangerous man.

Treat him as one of the outfit but keep out of his way. He'd killed Jim Harrison in Abilene, the story of the fight growing with the telling. It was a legend now throughout that section of the cow country, a vastly exaggerated legend that made Jude silently angry. He wanted to be one of the outfit; learn the cow business, save his money, take part of his pay in cows, perhaps. Get an iron of his own started. That was all he wanted. But Blackie had warned him several more times that Red Tolliver was talking, that killers were being brought in by the nester pool, and Jude had acted accordingly.

One of the men of the outfit innocently started the new flurry. He had discovered, in going after his saddle one morning, that there was a new gun sheath laced into the left fork of Jude's saddle. Jude had taken it in town during one of his freighting trips and had the sheath fitted, the mate to his .44 now in his warbag. That had been one of his own innovations, and he hadn't dreamed of what the repercussions would be. Word had spread like wildfire that the nester kid who had shot and killed Twogun Jim Harrison in Abilene now had a second gun sheath fitted to his saddle.

A two gunman. Look out for this kid just turning nineteen. He was chain lightning, a coiled rattler. Keep out of his way.

Peanut's eyes nodded approval as Jude took down the repeater. "You shuh got a level head on you, son," he said. "Just because ah'm a buildin' man now is no reason why ah don't hear things. They're out to git you, son. Harrison was theah best bet. You eliminated him. They won't fo'get. Keep yo' eyes open, son."

"I'm depending on Blackie, Colonel," Jude smiled, for he and Peanut now were on familiar terms. "I don't want any trouble with anybody. I just don't want to get caught on the short end, that's all."

The other man's stern face relaxed in a smile. "Don't worry, son. You won't. Ah know men."

And that, coming from a man who had been through four years of shot and shell, was something to warm Jude's young heart. He started toward the bunkhouse, carrying rifle and canteen.

"Mr. Gordon," called a commanding feminine voice.

JUDE turned. It was Nell Travers, sitting side saddle and dressed in the latest in riding fashions. Jude had caught occasional glimpses of her during the past weeks while she pored over plans with Peanut and watched the new twelve room house rise. His greetings were always the same: a brief touch of his hand to his hatbrim. That much he owed to any woman, because his mother had taught him so; and Edwina in particular. For Edwina did something to his senses. Sight of her slim figure and golden hair started strange emotions in him that he had never been able to control. She was Blackie's "woman." She was a singer from the dance-halls of Abilene and, therefore, something to be sniffed at by the housewives in Alden. But she was warm and human and friendly where Nell Travers was cold and unfriendly and arrogant.

She was coming up at a jog trot now, reining in beside him, her right leg up around the horn of the side saddle.

"Well," she snapped. "Help me down and take this horse and see that he's unsaddled and rubbed down."

He looked up at her, naively unaware of just what his handsome young face and broad, healthy shoulders were doing to her emotions. Nor would he have cared had he known. She has thought him an ignorant, uneducated young farm hand from the plains of Kansas, working for her father at a thirty dollar a month wage, unused to women, like the rest of the hands on the ranch who went out of their way to lift a hat and say, "Howdy, ma'm." But a golden haired young singer had kissed him tenderly and there had been mention of still another woman; Angelica. He had ignored her, even humiliated her. Now she had taken the offensive.

She was not used to being ignored. Pride and her position as the owner's daughter demanded his subjugation.

He said, gravely, "I'm afraid you've made a mistake, Miss Travers. I'm a freighter, not a cow hand. I'm used to handling a four horse team. Here comes Cic. I'm sure he'll give you a hand. Oh, Cic!"

Cic strolled over.

"Miss Travers needs some help to get down outa that side saddle and have her horse rubbed down."

"Sure," said the amiable Cic, quite unaware of the flame in the young woman's eyes. "Here, Miss," extending cupped hands. "Just put thet foot of yourn in my

hand an' I'll help you down an' take care of the hoss."

She slid to the ground without his aid, her eyes blazing at Jude's retreating back with a canteen over one shoulder, a repeating rifle in the other hand, and the heavy pistol at one hip.

"Take this horse," she snapped at the surprised Cic.

"Yes, ma'm. What'll I do with 'im?"

"Cook him for supper!" she cried out angrily and strode toward the house.

"Me," mumbled Cic, quite confused by it all, "I'm just a' ugly cow hand who got a jaw busted by a Union sharpshooter during the war. I don't know what from nothin'. Come on, you 'mount'. You shore ain't a' ordinary cow hoss. No cow hoss would allow sech a rig to be strapped on him without throwin' the owner sky high. A side saddle. Gawdlemighty!"

He led the animal toward the corral and Mike Kessler strolled by. "Look at him," Mike jeered. "The old groom himself."

"Yo're a liar!" Cic snarled at the grinning Mike. "I ain't never been married an' that ain't all—I ain't intendin' to *get* married!"

Mike paced him past the bunkhouse, mincing with a hand on one hip, for the edification of a dozen grinning punchers waiting the supper call. "Rub him down, cowboyyyyyy," Mike directed in a feminine tone of voice. "Be sure and put on his nightgown and don't let him set up in bed and smoke. I shall be away to the hounds in the mawnin'. Hurry, groom."

Cic let go of the reins and bent to the ground. He came up with three rocks in his left hand and began pelting. Mike broke for the protection of the bunkhouse while roars of laughter rolled out. He ducked a final stone that bounced off the wall and turned in the doorway.

"Don't forget, my man," he whooped. "Early in the *mawnin'*. The foxes, you know. They're chasing all the fat off the steers. Tally-ho!"

Cic strode on toward the corrals, his face flaming, swearing silent vengeance on Mike and the other howling punchers. Jude went inside and divested himself of canteen and hat. He placed the .44-40 beneath his bunk.

He was unaware that up on the east porch of the ranchhouse a young woman had witnessed it all, her eyes blazing angrily at the horseplay, and blaming Jude for her "humiliation." She went into the house, snapping at Jessie, and vowing revenge.

THEY rolled out the next morning, early as usual, and this time Jude, wearing his chaps, went beneath the saddle shed and brought out his riding gear, carrying it toward the horse corral. Bugger had just driven them in, swinging down to put the pole gate into place. Jude watched the other riders catch their mounts, holding back because he was unfamiliar with corral procedure. He might get a horse that belonged to another man. When the riders thinned out he took his rope and went in, selecting a blocky looking sorrel with four white feet. The animal was what was known as a "cream sorrel," and it was built for work; a deep barrel, a short body, and sturdy legs.

Mike Kessler, already mounted and awaiting Nute Shelby's orders for the day, looked over at Cic and grinned. Cic said, "Just stand by an' see he don't get hurt."

"Slim" Connors, the bronk stomper of the outfit, twisted his swivel hips up into the saddle and said, "Thet sorrel's a good hoss but hard to handle."

"Let the kid alone," Cic cut in, far more sharply than he usually spoke.

"He's got to learn all by himself," Mike said. "But don't worry—Jude can take care of himself. You boys just help me stand by to haze in case Jude gets into trouble."

The cream sorrel with the four white feet — white sox, they were called — was cagey. Jude eyed another horse, went in with his loop swinging, then spun and caught the ducking sorrel. He drew it up to short length along the rope and put on the bridle, forcing its clenched teeth apart. It stood, half quivering, wary. It sidled a bit as the blanket and then the saddle struck its sleek back. Jude cinched up tight, removed the rope from its neck, coiled it, fastened it on the saddle, and took up the reins.

Bugger stood by the corral gate, grinning a white toothed grin. He knew every horse in the cavvy as well as he knew Jessie. He knew that cream sorrel. Bugger got his hand on the gate, ready to "turn 'im out."

Jude grasped the reins in his left hand and then the left side of the head stall too. He pulled the sorrel's head around hard as his foot found the stirrup and he mounted.

He straightened and let go of the headstall. Then something exploded beneath him and he felt himself sailing through the air. He landed on his left side and rolled over twice.

He got up, grim-lipped, and dusted himself off, thankful that he had hit on his left side. A number of men, wearing pistols, had had hips broken by falling on the hard outlines of the gun at a right hip.

Jude strode toward the sorrel. It stood across the corral, facing him, ears pointed and nostrils flaring. He was aware that Cic, Slim, and Mike were watching from the outside of the corral.

"Open that gate, Bugger," Jude called over his shoulder.

He took up the trailing reins and got ready to swing up a second time. The cream sorrel was half crouched, waiting. This time, when Jude hit leather, he hooked his rowels into the cinch to hang on. The sorrel went into action, straight toward the open gate.

"Ride 'im, Jude, ride 'im!" yelled Bugger's encouraging voice. "Fog 'im, boy!"

The sorrel went out into the open, bucking at every jump, twisting his blocky body from side to side, his head down between his legs. He headed straight for the ranchhouse and, right in front of the east porch, went up sunfishing and came down twisting.

He came down alone. Jude struck heavily, almost on his face, and three riders came spurring by hard to haze the sorrel. Cic plunged in, rowelling his horse hard, and grabbed the dangling reins. He came leading the animal back as Jude got up and dusted himself off for the second time. He became aware then that Travers, his wife, and his daughter, were standing on the porch in the morning dawn. The T4 owner still had a breakfast fork in one hand.

Jude found himself looking straight into Nell Travers' triumphant eyes.

"A freighter, you said you were," she laughed softly. "I never thought cowboys told the truth, but I apologize, Mr. Gordon. You told the truth. You're a freighter. You better take off those chaps and go back to hauling lumber."

Travers was more sympathetic. "A horse is easy to handle, son, once he knows who's boss. You just happened to pick a mean one. Nute should have known better."

"He's not mean," Jude said.

HE MOUNTED a third time, right in front of the porch, his face grim with determination. This time he held back on the reins enough to make the sorrel hold up its head a bit, not getting the bit between its teeth. They tore up the ground, the sorrel pitching in a circle until the animal, almost crashing into the side of the dining dugout, finally gave it up. It knew who was boss. Jude reined it over toward the corrals where a silent Nute Shelby had witnessed the whole show. Cic, Mike, and Slim Connors followed, at a lope.

Cic said to Nute, and quite casually, "Where you want me to work today?"

"Take the south boundary over near Double Moutain River. Better get some grub from the cook house. Jude'll go with you. Work everything back this direction. Better start combing the brakes now than at roundup time. Push 'em all back."

They went south in the early morning sun, the two of them side by side. The horizon lay before them, mesquites and gullies and rolling swells of the prairie. They covered ten miles and finally came out on a bluff, looking down at a quarter of a mile expanse of dry sand supporting a thin strip of gyp water three inches deep.

"There's old Double Mountain," Cic said. "She don't look much now but you oughta see her when we get a heavy rain. She comes bustin' down hell bent for election, all muddy and mad, takin' everything hard that gets in her way. That's when some of these damned dirty nesters get in their worst work. They drive a dozen cows with calves right down to the edge of the water and then down the cows with rifles. They float downstream for miles before the water goes down; an' by thet time the thieves have driven the bawlin' calves onto their own places, gotched and branded. We know it's T4 stuff bue we ain't got any way of provin' it."

"Suppose you caught one rebranding or shooting?"

"Bring him in alive, if you can. If you can't bring him in dead. That's why Blackie bought that gun for you. But Jim Underhill is square and if you can prove a clear case of rustlin', there won't be any trouble with the law. Underhill knows what we're up ag'in. He ain't takin' any sides. After all, Travers don't own his ranges anymore than the rest of the cattlemen in

Texas. He just took up and is holdin' on. The nesters have a legal right in here, an' Travers is square enough to admit it. He just don't like for 'em to be stealing him dry all the time. A steer now an' then for beef, sure. But not organized rustlin'."

They rode eastward along the bluff. A mile further on the river made a sharp turn to the right and faded into the distance. Cic reined up and pointed that way.

"Our boundary line ends here, Jude. Over there is nester country. Them river lands and the prairies over there for miles is swarmin' with 'em. We've got line camps all along here—riders on the lookout fer stock that they keep pushin' back. But the cows slip through an' we never see 'em again. Then they make night raids while the line riders are asleep. By the way, Jude, you see thet shack about a mile down the turn of the river—down there among the mesquites an' cottonwoods?"

Jude stood high in the stirrups of the new saddle, gun at his hip and the second one in the saddle sheath on the left fork. He nodded.

"That's Jim Harrison's place," Cic said. "Or, rather, it was," he finished awkwardly. "But . . . come on, we've got work to do."

CHAPTER XIX

THIS was the south boundary of Harry Travers' "holdings" and their job was to round up everything wearing his T4 brand and shove it back north, toward the grounds of the home ranch.

"We've got two line camps along here, spaced ten miles apart," Cic explained to Jude. "Two riders in each camp. They're supposed to patrol the line every day and push back everything they see wearing the boss's brand. One of the camps is about four miles west of here. But I never trusted Ernie Davis an' his pard Frank Jergens any too much. We shoulda run into 'em by now. You can see miles in this country when you get up on a rise, and we ain't seen 'em yet. Ten to one," he added sarcastically, "they're down at one of the stills some of these nesters run, guzzlin' raw corn whiskey an' makin' a deal to let the nesters slip by nights to run off T4 cattle."

"I thought a rider was supposed to be loyal to his outfit," Jude remarked.

That one brought a hard laugh from the scar faced man riding beside him. "An honest puncher sticks by his outfit, Jude, come the devil and all his angels. He gets forty dollars a month and found, and for that he's supposed to stick by the boss. Most men do. But it's purty easy for a nester rustler to pay off a few dollars extra, or even split the profits, to have line riders workin' hand an' glove with them. There's some as'll even give the rustlers a hand. But I don't know fer sure, I'm only guessin'. I'm just telling you these things because you're out to make a puncher and you got to learn. But, hell—come on, look what I see down there."

What he saw was about thirty head of cattle grazing contentedly down in a draw below them. They dropped down a sharp, winding cow trail and the wild cattle threw up their heads and began to trot off. The two riders followed them for a mile north and then wheeled back south again, toward the line. They worked on west, picking up scattered stuff here and there. By now they were a mile apart. About then Jude spotted an old bull with wide spreading horns, alone on a ridge among the mesquites. He was at least seven or eight years old and wore no brand.

One of the wary old brush boys that knew every foot of the country and had slipped through the roundups. Cic had told him about these. Down in south Texas, near the coast, they were known as moss horns because they hid out in the timber and soon collected a growth of moss on their heads. Hence any old such bull as the one he now saw was known as a moss horn.

Jude spurred the blocky sorrel up over the ridge and the bull wheeled, disappearing into the mesquites. Jude went after him. He certainly had no intention of trying to rope and gotch *that* animal. He'd have tried to stop a locomotive first. But his orders had been to drive everything northward and Jude obeyed. The sorrel hunched into a run and they went smashing down through the mesquites, hard after the pumping haunches of the disappearing bull, its tail up over its back. Thorny limbs struck at his chaps and body and he threw up an arm now and then to protect his face. The bull was heading straight south, shooting for the bluffs and the underbrush of the river below. Jude worked dull rowels into the sorrel's pumping sides and the animal that had thrown him twice proved its worth in a final burst of stamina

As Jude started to dismount, he drew the saddle-gun,

whipped it across his body and started to pour lead

that turned the fleeing longhorn and sent it crashing back to the north.

Jude kept after him hard, not giving him any chance to turn back. But he made the mistake of crowding the tiring animal too close. The next thing he knew two long horns were facing him at bay.

It was the sorrel that saved them both. It lunged to one side in time for one of the needle tipped horns to miss its flanks by inches. Jude sat there in the saddle astride the heaving horse and watched the bull's lean rump disappear . . . south to its sanctuary along the river.

Lesson number one. Don't crowd a critter too far and put it on the prod.

He was learning fast.

He reined over and began jogging west again, wondering what had happened to Cic. Now and and then he stopped to listen for the sounds of the other man working cattle out of the brush, but he heard nothing. Jude continued on along the line, dropping in and out of gullies that led toward the river. In one of these, choked with mesquites, he rode around a clump and saw Mike.

He saw the barrel of the rifle too. It was lined squarely at his chest from a distance of not more than fifteen feet.

Cic stood off to one side. His gunbelt was on the ground. There were two other men, including the man with the rifle. He was bearded, unwashed, and ill dressed. He wore shoes instead of boots.

"All right, puncher," he snarled, baring yellow teeth between the hair on his brutal face. "Reach one han' down cautious like an' unbuckle thet gunbelt an' let it drop to the ground. You make one other move an' I'll bore you with this Sharps."

Cic's voice cut in calmly, "You'd better do what he says, Jude. He was a good friend of Jim Harrison an' near as mean. This other coyote is Frank Jergens, who was supposed to be ridin' line instead of helpin' slip them three cows an' calves across the river."

Jude looked at the renegade T4 puncher. He was ferret-toothed, shifty-eyed, a hard grinning youth with a spine that curved into sloping shoulders. His gun was covering Cic.

"Move!" snarled the bearded nester with the Sharps.

Jude had come up with his left side to them. He reached with his right hand and unbuckled his gunbelt. It thudded to the ground.

"Now git down," ordered the man with the rifle. "So yu're the smart younker who killed Jim Harrison, eh?" he sneered. "Well, yu won't be killin' anymore nesters. It's out fer yu."

JUDE leaned over and half lifted his leg as though to dismount, his hand unfastened the snap that held the sheath gun in place. Then he snatched it in a lightning move and shot across the neck of the sorrel. He killed the man with the Sharps but the sorrel plunged and, with one leg out of the saddle, Jude hit the ground.

Jergens had spun, firing, his slow mentality making him panicky. Two shots struck the ground by Jude before he got lined. Then he shot Frank Jergens three times. The puncher went down in a crumpled heap. His legs began to thresh, the spur rowels making rattling sounds. Jude had snapped up, unaware that to Cic's amazed eyes he was a flaming faced bundle of death, tawny as a puma and as chain lightning fast; deadly as a striking rattlesnake.

Jergens was still threshing around on his back, leaving red smears on the ground. Blood was coming out of his mouth and he was making horrible, choking sounds. Presently he shuddered and lay still while a flaming faced Jude Gordon stood like a stone statue, the long barrelled six shooter still gripped in his hand. Then he lifted his face and spoke in a voice that Cic would never forget.

"I'm sorry I got separated from you, Cic. It was my fault, chasin' that moss horn bull. You all right?"

Cic blew a *whoosh* out of his lungs. "I'm all right. They got the drop on me. I was follerin' Tabor—thet's thet nester there—drivin' three cows an' calves toward the river, sneakin' up to ketch him red handed. Then Frank slipped up on *me* an' got the drop from behind. They were gettin' ready to make a cold-blooded job of it when we heard the sorrel."

He bent and picked up his gunbelt, strapping it on again. He rolled a cigarette and his fingers were trembling. Jude went to the sorrel some thirty yards away and led the sweat covered animal back. It had been a hard run after that bull.

Cic said, to cover his shakiness, "You got to learn how to work a cow horse, Jude. He's like a man. He can sprint so

far an' then he's got to be given a chance to blow an' get the trembles outa his legs."

Jude had shoved the death dealing weapon back into the sheath and buckled the strap. He had shot with his left hand, thankful that he had done quite a lot of practicing on the way down from Abilene. He might not have bothered had it not been for the fact that he remembered how Blackie had handled so dexteriously a gun in his left hand. His and Blackie's trails had more or less parted, but Blackie was still his idol. So Jude had made excuses to go off into distant gullies, allowing the outfit to go on ahead; and when they were out of the sound of gunfire, the walls of a gully muffling the shots, he had pounded away with first one hand and then the other.

But he knew that that first shot across the sorrel's neck, the shot that had killed Tabor the nester rustler, was more luck than anything else.

"What de we do now?" he asked Cic.

"Leave 'em lay an' get back to the ranch. I've had enough work to last me fer today. Somebody'll have to go in town an' bring out the sheriff. "But," he added, "you got nothin' to worry about. It was them or us."

"I could drift, I reckon. Plenty of room for a man over in Arizona Territory."

"You won't drift. There's no reason to. Jim don't like this rustlin' anymore than we do. You've just saved him some extra work an' the T4 the Lord knows how many head. Come on."

They swung up. The ride back northward toward the ranch was done mostly in silence. It was just before noon when they came in and unsaddled. Jude took the death dealing weapon out of its sheath on the left fork of the saddle and went to the bunkhouse. He began cleaning it, in silence.

It was, he thought, a pretty tough thing for a man to have to kill two other men on his nineteenth birthday. He worked at the gun, still a little shaken by it all.

CIC had walked on over to the ranchhouse. Two horses were at the hitch rail by the east porch. Cic went in without knocking. He took off his hat and strode into the dining room, ignoring Nell Travers' disapproving eyes. The family was having an early dinner and Nute Shelby was eating with them because the T4 owner wanted to discuss plans for the coming fall roundup.

Shelby looked up from his plate.

"You're back early," he commented, a little sharply.

"I got reason to be back early," the scar faced puncher said. "Mind if I have a cup of coffee? I need it. What I need is a drink of the Admiral's whiskey. There was hell on the south line this morning."

Travers had nodded toward a chair and then at Jessie, bustling around the table. He looked at Cic.

"What?"

"Tabor an' Frank Jergens are dead. They're down in a gully close to the river."

"You kill them?"

Cic shook his head. "Jude shot the both of them dead from thet saddle gun sheath of his. He saved my life," he added simply.

They were staring at him. Nell Travers' eyes were a little wide.

"How come?" demanded Shelby. "What did Jergens have to do with it?"

"Plenty. He's in with the nesters. Me an' Jude hit the south line this mornin' an' started workin' the stuff back. Thet kid took to the brush like an old time brush popper. Thet boy's got the making of a cow hand—an' mebbe a little more. I was up on a ridge watching him when he went in after an old mossy. I shoulda warned him but figgered to let him learn the hard way. It was Old Brindle himself," he finished, grinning.

They had discovered Old Brindle the first time some three years before, one of the biggest bulls any of them ever had seen. He was then four years old and undisputed king of his domain. Jude hadn't been the first puncher who had tried to get him into the roundup herd.

"It was the sorrel saved him," Cic went on. "Thanks, Jessie," to the Negro woman. He put the cup of coffee on the table. "That's one reason I didn't warn him about thet sorrel this mornin'. I figgered if he could ride him he'd have a good cow horse under him, in case he got in trouble. So Old Brindle went back down through the brush with his tail over his back, heading toward the underbrush along the river, an' I went on shoving back more stuff. I kept lookin' for Jergens an' Davis. I never liked either one of 'em an' allus figgered you made a mistake in putting them on

a line camp job. Anyhow, we didn't see hide nor hair of 'em until I spotted Tabor down a draw. He was drivin' three cows with unbranded calves that slipped through the spring roundup toward the river."

"Rustling?" demanded Travers sharply.

"In plain daylight," nodded Cic, sipping at the black coffee. "But I wanted to be sure. So I follered him through the brush until he dropped 'em down a draw almost on the edge of the river. Next thing I knowed Jergens was close up behind me with his gun out, covering me. He was grinning like a turkey gobbler."

He took another sip at the steaming coffee. They knew there was little use in trying to rush him. Cic would tell the story in his own way and take his time. They listened, the girl's eyes riveted upon his badly scarred face. Cic put the cup down on the table.

He continued: "I don't know how he slipped up on me thataway; maybe because I was so busy watching Tabor. But he had the drop on me, thet gun levelled right at my belly an' not twenty feet separating us. I didn't have a chance. 'Sneakin' around pryin', eh?' he says with a nasty grin I didn't like. 'Well, just drop thet gunbelt and don't make any funny moves.' I dropped it. He was ready to shoot. Then he bellers for Tabor, who's up on the ridge. I'd been sneakin' along down in the draw. Tabor come down, an' I never seen a meaner lookin' man than he was, what with thet beard an 'thet big rifle he was carryin'. It was outs for me an' I knew it. Then just about thet time Jude come over the ridge. I had to stand there while he come ridin' right around a mesquite clump plumb into the muzzle of Tabor's Sharps. I wanted to holler out an' warn him but Jergens had thet gun lined at my belly an' was warnin' *me* to keep quiet. So Jude come up an' Tabor covered him with the Sharps, orderin' him to drop his gun belt."

HE PAUSED again, long enough to take another swallow of the now cooling coffee. "I never seen anybody as cool as thet kid was. When Tabor told him to drop thet belt of his'n he done it without a word. Then he started to swing down on the off side of his hoss. Right then plain and fancy hell broke loose. I've never seen anybody move as fast. His right leg was up outa the stirrup when he jerked thet gun outa the saddle sheath on the left side an' let drive across the neck of the sorrel! Just one shot an' he got thet rustlin' nester plumb center! The sorrel bolted an' threw him to the ground. He come up firin'. Jergens shot twice at him before Jude, layin' on the ground, got goin'. He just layed there on the ground pumpin' 'em sorta slow an' easy an' cool into Frank. Then he got up an you'd never imagined what he said."

"No telling," Travers said.

"He said, cool an' as calm as could be, 'I'm sorry I got separated from you, Cic. It was my fault, chasin' thet moss horn bull.' Just like thet!"

"Where's Jude now?' Shelby cut in.

"Down at the bunkhouse. He's half way figgerin' on driftin'."

Travers rose, pushing back from his half finished meal. "Drift, hell," he said. "That kid's done this ranch more good since the night Blackie brought him into camp up in Kansas than any dozen punchers on the outfit. Harrison was bad enough, heading the nesters like he did, though Blackie would have killed him in time. But Tabor was one of the worst. He was a murderin' Missouri guerilla before he came out here two year ago and started rustling. Many's the time I've stood in Sol's store an' watched him sneering at me through that dirty beard. He was as mean as they come."

"I know it," Cic agreed. "Frank Jergens wouldn't have the nerve to do a cold blooded job like they were goin' to do on me. Tabor was just gettin' ready to let me have it plumb center with that Sharps when Jude showed up."

"Where are you going?" asked Mrs. Tabor.

"Down there. You didn't see Davis?" he asked Cic.

"Nope. He's either in camp or down along the river at one of the whiskey stills, guzzlin' liquor with the nesters. Him an' Frank were cronies."

"He can guzzle some more of it," snapped out the T4 owner. "I'm going down there and kick him off the T4 range."

"If he heard them shots an' come down to investigate," Cic grinned with grim humor, "I got a hunch you won't have to kick him off. Ten to one he's already drifted."

Shelby had pushed back his chair and

come to his feet. He looked at Travers. "I'll go down with you and we'll wait for the sheriff. Cic, the first one of the boys comes in you tell him to eat in a hurry, saddle a good horse, and burn the breeze for the sheriff's office. Tell him to come on out here right away."

"And," Travers put in, "you tell him that hed better act accordingly or I'll swing every vote against him in the next election. We've had a showdown coming with these rustling nesters for a long time. I don't mind any man butchering one of my beeves to get something to eat for his wife and kids until the crops bring in a little money. But, by God, I won't be stole dry by anybody!"

The three men went out. Slim Connors was down in the corral. He had just worked a lathered young gelding in through the gate and was swivelling down. He'd held its head up, not letting it buck, but when it wanted to run he'd let it run.

Travers went down to the corral, accompanied by the two other men. Connors was unsaddling, talking to the horse; low and soothing.

"Easy now, boy. Yuh've had a good run an' got the kinks outa yore system an' yuh feel a lot better. Yuh an' me are friends. We both got a job to do. Mine's teachin' yuh not to turn mean. Yourn's to learn the cow business. Now yuh go over there in that nice powdered horse dung in the sun an' have yoreself a good roll. Work that dry stuff into yore hide an' then git up an' shake it off. It'll dry up the sweat."

HE STROKED the sweat drenched gelding along the shoulder and then slipped off the bridle. The dun gelding might have understood him for all its actions. It promptly ambled across the corral, buckled its knees and went down. It's sleek, soft belly went up against the sun as it enjoyed a glorious roll in the dung, beaten to powder by a thousand churning hoofs. It worked its neck along the ground, switched over twice, and the bronk stomper looked over at Travers and grinned.

"They say any hoss that rolls over three times is a good 'un," he chuckled. "That makes him one of the best. Give him a little education cutting out steers in the fall roundup an' he'll be ready for the trail to Abilene next spring.'

"Slim," ordered Travers, "go over and grab a bite to eat quick as you can. I want you to saddle a fresh horse and burn the breeze for the sheriff in Alden. Tell Jim I said get out here right away."

Connors paused, in the act of closing the corral gate. "What's up?" he queried.

"Plenty," snapped the T4 owner. "Jude killed Frank Jergens and that damned Tabor on the south line this morning. Caught 'em red handed."

"Gawdlemighty! That quiet nester kid. I don't need anything to eat. I'll eat in town. I'm practically half way there already, boss."

He grabbed up bridle and saddle and headed for the next corral.

CHAPTER XX

HE WAS out in a matter of minutes, burning the breeze down across the flats. He disappeared into the mesquites across the gully, working his fresh mount with sure, skilled knowledge to get the utmost out of it on the fourteen mile run. He was taking the short cut, not following the road.

He drove into town and, being a bronk stomper, his mount came first. He let it drink about half what it wanted at the town horse trough, took it over back of Sol's store, rubbed it down, and then walked it in a circle for fifteen minutes to let it cool off. He loosened the cinch, tied it at the corner of the wagon yard back of the store, and went in through the back. Sol was talking with a man when Slim came in; a nester.

Sol never took part in any discussions concerning the feeling between the rustling nesters and the cowmen. He was neutral.

The man was Red Tolliver.

"Hello, Slim," the merchant greeted. "Never expected you to be in town at this time of day. Getting lazy?"

"Looking for the sheriff. Seen him around?"

"He went north this morning, up around Duck Creek. Somebody found a puncher of Hensen's with a hole in his back. But Blackie's in the office. At least, he was a little while ago. Anything up?"

"Plenty, Sol. That nester kid Jude and Cic caught Tabor rustlin' three T4 cows this morning, with unbranded calves. Frank Jergens was with Tabor. They got

the drop on Cic an' then on Jude. But that nester kid fooled 'em. He yanked a gun outa a sheath on his saddle an' started throwin' balls. He killed the both of 'em."

Slim knew the importance of being the bearer of vital news. He enjoyed dispensing such news.

"He killed who?" Sol demanded.

"Frank Jergens an' that nester Tabor. Tabor had the drop on him with a Sharps rifle, but Jude was too fast for him. He dropped him cold. Then he got Jergens."

Sol pursed his lips. He hated this thing of cattleman versus nester. There was land enough for all. Why must these men be enemies?

Red Tolliver said, through his lashless lids, "So Tabor's dead?"

Slim eyed him coolly. "Bored plumb center. Seems to me I recollect he was a good friend of yourn an' Harrison's."

His right hand lay close at his hip, fingers near the butt of his pistol. Tolliver had tensed. Sol saw it and pushed through, between them.

"Cut it out!" he yelled. "This is a store, not a saloon. If you want gun fighting, go over to the saloons and do it. I'll have no killings here."

Slim dropped his hand away from his belt. He turned his back on Tolliver and moved on toward the front door. He came out on the porch in the shade of the overhang and turned left, northward along the boardwalk. Across the street the new red sandstone walls of the courthouse gleamed with color in the hot sun. Ahead of him was a sign that jutted out over the boardwalk. It said, *Sheriff's Office.*

Inside the office Blackie sat back of the sheriff's desk, his booted and spurred feet up on the scarred top. He was leaning back in his chair, looking at Edwina. He was laughing softly, and the deputy sheriff's star on his breast seemed to gleam brightly.

"All right," he was saying. "You're wonderful and I love you. But this is a big country and I've got plans. It's a new, fresh, raw country. It's growing. It's got room for men with vision and imagination . . . and I'm one of them."

She looked at him, her lovely face registering understanding, and just a touch of pain.

"No, Blackie," she said firmly, "you don't love me. You don't love anybody but yourself. There was a time when I would have given my life for you. You came out of nowhere, bold and good looking, and different from most men. You were careless—devil-may-care. And you swept me off my feet. I tried hard to resist you. I fought with all the power I had at my command. But it was no use. I'd have followed you to the ends of the earth. I'd have lived with you in a brush and mud shack, had you said the word. But you didn't. All you wanted was for me to come with you to Alden. You made promises. I believed them. And now I know you for what you are. A man whose soul is wrapped up only in himself and his ambitions. You're not fooling me, Blackie."

"You're talking in riddles," the deputy said sharply.

She shook her golden head. "Not riddles, Blackie. The truth. In a small town there are few secrets. I found out things I never realized could have been true."

"Yeah?" he was staring at her, narrowly.

"You have more than four thousand dollars in the bank here in Alden," Edwina replied quietly. "The money means nothing to me, of course. I didn't love you for money. But when you came to Abilene, writing me to meet you there, you didn't have money."

"I won at the wheel that night Jude and me shot it out with the dealer and he killed Harrison," he said in a hard voice.

"About eighteen hundred. You spent much of that despite the fact that you were gone from town for four days and I didn't know where you were."

He shifted his spurred boots to the floor. "What are you getting at?" he demanded harshly.

SHE smiled at him in a kind of patient sort of way. "Just that this is the end for us, Blackie. The flame in me burned bright, almost fiercely, because I loved you that much—enough to give up everything and follow you, come with you, strong in the belief that you'd keep your promise of a marriage and a future out here. But not anymore. I see you in your true light now. Ambitious, greedy, and willing to push anybody down in the mud so long as you can use them as a stepping stone to your own ambitions. You never loved me. You never loved anybody but yourself. So it's all over. Where you got that four thousand dollars you put in the

bank I don't know nor will I ask. But as of now this is the end for us."

She rose and he started to reply, but at that moment Slim Connors came in through the front door.

"Hello, Slim."

"Hello, Blackie. Howdy, Miss," to Edwina. "Sol said Jim wasn't around."

"He's out of town, Slim," Blackie said. "Went north on business this morning. Somebody got dry gulched up north, on Duck Creek. What's on your mind?"

Slim was rolling a cigarette, taking his time. He licked and stuck the quirly in the left corner of his mouth.

"Not much on mine, I reckon," he replied, slashing a match across a cocked up boot sole. "But plenty on the boss's an' Nute's. There was trouble on the south boundary this mornin'."

"Trouble?"

"Maybe it wouldn't exactly be called trouble," the bronk stomper replied, spinning the match toward a brass gobboon. "From what I hear it happened too fast for that. Frank Jergens an' Tabor got the drop on Cic. Him an' Jude was ridin' the south line. Then Jude rode up an' they got the drop on him too. Only thing was they didn't figger on that gun sheath he rigged up on the left fork of his saddle. Accordin' to what little I know about it, Jude used that left hand gun. He got both of 'em cold; chain lightnin'. Their carcasses are down in a gulch ten mile south of the ranch. Travers wants the sheriff to burn the breeze out to the ranch. It's a twenty-four mile ride for you. But it looks like open war. Them nesters were out to git Jude an' for the second time he was a little too fast for 'em. I saw Red Tolliver in Sol's store just now. He seemed plumb upset when I told him about Tabor. Started to throw a gun on me."

Blackie had come up to his feet. Edwina sat looking at the bronk stomper. "Is Jude all right?" she asked.

Slim smiled at her patronizingly. "I reckon so. Nobody said anything about anything bein' wrong with him when I left the ranch."

"I'll saddle a horse right away," Blackie said.

Slim pulled on the cigarette and let it drop between his fingers. "All right, Blackie. That dun of mine is good for the return trip to the ranch. But I'm hongry. I'll eat an' meet you over back of Sol's store in about fifteen minutes."

He went out. Edwina had come to her feet.

"So you don't trust me anymore?" Blackie asked the singer.

"It's the end for us, Blackie."

He shrugged. "What are you going to do?"

"I have a little money and I know dresses and sewing. I'm going to open up a millinery shop in town. I might be the town bad woman but women can't resist dresses."

She went out and Blackie followed her. She turned toward Sol's store and he went along the north side of the square, past the rows of saloons and gambling dives, toward another livery in back of one of them. He saw Slim's lean form disappear into a restaurant not far away.

Blackie went into the livery barn and came out with his riding gear. Ed Bronson, the owner, was home for dinner. The hostler was in the office. Red Tolliver swung down from his horse as the deputy was cinching up a long-legged claybank gelding.

"You hear the news?" Tolliver demanded sharply.

Blackie nodded, grunting as he notched the cinch and took the stirrup down off the horn. He turned to Red. "I'm riding out to make an investigation." He didn't add that he also wanted to see Nell Travers.

TOLLIVER'S heavy, freckled face darkened. "I don't like it, Blackie. You said you'd swing that little sidewinder over on our side. I didn't mind him killin' Harrison. You were supposed to do that in Abilene to get him outa the way so's we could take over. But the kid beat you to it. That was all right, but this ain't. Tabor was the best man with a runnin' iron we got in the pool. You waited too long."

"I'm still running the show, Red," the deputy said coldly, "and don't you ever forget it. It's tough luck, all right, losing these two men. It also means that Davis will have to go. If he hasn't had sense enough to pull stakes and get out, I'll have to make a show of chasing him out of the country. But Jude'll be worth any three Tabors if I can swing him."

"I'll tell the boys," Tolliver scowled.

"They're whisperin' around among themselves that this nester kid ain't a nester at all but a hired killer brought in by Travers to do just the kind of a job he done this mornin'. I don't like it an' neither do they."

Blackie swung up. He looked down at the big pot-bellied man with the two guns. "That's plain poppycock," he snapped. "I brought that kid into the outfit myself. Jude's all right. He'll do what I say. So pass the word along that he's in with us and to do no back shooting. I told you I was running this show. If we work it right the Nester Pool can put three thousand head up the trail next year. They got that Hardin puncher over in the line camp on Duck Creek yesterday. It's a hint to Hensen to sell out. I hear reports Travers is figuring on buying. When he does we'll have him spread out too thin. We can rustle from him and the Circle C north of him dry. Savvy?"

Tolliver shrugged his bull shoulders. "All right, Blackie, just as you say."

"That's what I'm saying. And from now on don't ever be seen talking to me here in town unless we're quarreling and making threats. You slip up the back way of the hotel, as usual."

He rode up back of the saloons, threaded his horse in between them, and presently Slim came out of the restaurant with a toothpick in his mouth. "I reckon we're ready to roll," he said. "soon's I git my hoss."

"No big hurry," Blackie said. "I can't get back to town tonight anyhow. I'll stay at the ranch."

CHAPTER XXI

THEY made the return trip to the ranch, covering the miles in a little over two hours. Connors went on to the corrals to unsaddle his horse and Blackie swung down before the west porch. His status was different now. He was no longer one of the hands; he was a deputy sheriff and, therefore, welcome. Nell Travers met him at the door, opening it for him. Her pretty face was all smiles.

"So it finally had to take range trouble to make you come out and visit us, did it, Blackie?" she pouted prettily.

He removed his hat as he entered, lean and lithe, the two pistols low at his hips. The badge Jim Underhill had pinned on him gleamed brightly on the breast of his red shirt.

"I've been busy," he said, and added gallantly: "But if it was a matter of seeing you, I'd ride through a norther, Miss Travers."

"Never mind that 'Miss Travers' business. Just call me Nell."

He laughed easily. "All right, Nell. How's your mother?"

"Puttering with her flowers as usual. She has to keep busy someway. Say, when are you having another dance in town? It gets lonesome out here."

"Saturday night. And you'd better be there. We've got a new mandolin player—one of Hensen's punchers —who can make that thing talk. You'd better be there and if you don't save me a couple of square dances plus a few waltzes I'm just naturally going to feel all broken up."

They were walking toward the dining room. Jessie came in.

"Jessie, have you any coffee?" Nell demanded.

"Ah keeps a pot on the stove all the time, Miss Nell. You knows that," Jessie replied.

"Then serve us here," Nell commanded.

"Yas, ma'm."

Jessie went back to the kitchen and the two of them sat down. Mrs. Travers came in. She was wearing an old Stetson hat over her prematurely greying locks and carried a short spade in one hand. Blackie rose to his feet.

"Howdy, Mrs. Travers," he greeted.

"Well, Blackie!" she exclaimed. "I'm glad to see you again. So you finally came out to visit us?"

"He came out because he had to," Nell cut in. "That's the only reason he came out."

Mrs. Travers put the spade upright beside the door and removed her hat. "I know. This terrible rustling and all this killing. I waited for Harry for four years while the war was on. I thought that when it was all over we could have some peace—settle down here and grow old in contentment. Looks like there's no peace for a body anymore."

She sighed and took a chair. Jessie came in with two cups of coffee and placed them on the table, being careful to serve from the left side.

"Bring me one too, Jessie," Mrs. Travers

said. "I'm just all wore out."

"Where's Harry and Nute?" Blackie asked.

"South, down on the line. That terrible business this morning. They're waiting for you."

Blackie sipped at the coffee, his eyes on the girl's face. She aroused things in him. Strange passions that no other woman ever had aroused, backed up by the knowledge that she was the daughter of a cowman who hoped to become one of the biggest and most influential in Texas.

"It's bad, all right," the deputy agreed. "But this is a fight for survival, and every man has to look out for himself. I hope Jude does. By the way, where is he?"

"I don't know," Nell's mother cut in. "You're not going to arrest that boy, are you, Blackie?"

Blackie laughed at her. "Arrest Jude for killing a couple of cattle thieves? How could you ask such a question, Mrs. Travers.?"

"I'm glad," her daughter put in. "I—"

He looked at her sharply, his eyes glowing. Some kind of a strange jealousy shot through him. He said, "You like Jude, don't you?"

That one brought a rise from her. She flared. "I hate him," she declared angrily.

"No she doesn't," her mother said, taking the cup from Jessie and resting it on the arm of the chair. "Only trouble with her, Blackie, is that Jude is the one hand on this outfit who don't go out of his way to go moonin' over her. She thinks that because she's been back east to school and is passably pretty and the daughter of the owners that all the hands—"

"Mother!" Nell cut in indignantly, and tossed her russet colored hair.

'It's true," her mother declared calmly. "Jude's a good boy. Pokey told me his mother was a school teacher and gave him a good education. I wouldn't be surprised if he isn't better educated than Nell, barrin' the fancy manners they taught her at that expensive school we sent her to. And the only thing that's botherin' her is that Jude 'tends to his own business and don't go moonin' over her. He's one of the best boys we ever had on this ranch. Many's the time I've 'tended to sick hands down with everything from pneumonia to just plain drunkenness but we never had a better hand than Jude."

"I still don't like him," Nell declared.

BLACKIE finished the last of his coffee. He placed the cup on the table and looked at her. That jealousy was flaming within him again. "Yes, you do," he said. "They say that in a woman hate is akin to love. And just because Jude won't—"

Nell was on her feet, indignantly. "That's the silliest statement I ever heard in all my life, Blackie Hepburn! I won't hear another word."

He rose, leisurely and smiling. "All right. Have it your way, you lovely young spoiled thing. But I've got to be going. It'll take some hard riding to make the line and get back to town tonight."

"You can come back with Harry and Nute and stay here tonight," Mrs. Travers said. Cic's down at the bunkhouse waiting for you. He'll take you down to where it happened."

Blackie went out. He swung up and loped down to the bunkhouse. Cic came to the doorway and back of him was Jude.

"You wantin' Jude for this?" Cic asked belligerently.

"Keep your shirt on, boy," Blackie laughed. "I got to go through the formalities. Hello, Jude. Long time no see. I've been hearing things about you, pardner."

"You want me to go with you, Blackie?" Jude asked. He was glad to see his "pardner" again.

"Might be a good idea. Come on, boys, let's go down and take a look. Got a fresh horse handy?"

"Plenty." Cic said. "Come on, Jude."

They saddled up fresh mounts in the corral. Nell Travers came down, wearing a split leather riding skirt. "I'm going with you, Blackie," she announced. She ignored Jude.

"Best news I ever heard," the deputy smiled and went in with his rope to get her a mount.

They went southward, the four of them; and because the horses were fresh it didn't take too long to cover the ten miles. Jude rode to the rear. He always felt uncomfortable in the presence of the girl. He watched the rise and fall of Blackie's lithe, wiry shoulders, riding beside the girl, and he thought of Edwina in town. No doubt about it; Blackie had a way with women. His handsome face and devil-may-care

way of life did something to them. But Jude felt alone, even small. He wished that he could be like Blackie. Confident. Easy.

He was unaware that at noon word had spread through the dining dugout, the others of the outfit talking crisply and excitedly by turns. So this green kid from Kansas had done it again? First he'd saved Blackie's life by killing Harrison, head of the nester rustlers, in Abilene. The swaggering two gunman who had shot first but not accurately or fast enough. Now he'd done it again. Downed Tabor and Jergens with that gun he carried in a sheath on the left fork of his saddle. They'd known all along that this kid who freighted the building materials from town was different. You could tell it in the quiet way he conducted himself in the bunkhouse, sticking to himself and not talking much.

They hadn't known nor realized that Jude felt out of place among them, knowing he was green and unseasoned, and therefore feeling an inferiority toward them because they were seasoned cow hands and he was just a younker green as spring grass.

They had accepted his timidity as killer aloofness, and now it was being born out by what had happened this morning. The quiet young kid had done it again. Shot two rustlers with lightning thumbings of a single action six shooter, after they had the drop on him. Killed Tabor, one of the meanest, in the muzzle of a levelled Sharps.

These things Jude was unaware of as they covered the distance to the line. Cic led then down a draw. They broke into a lope and rounded a clump of mesquites. They pulled up by where Nute Shelby and Travers waited. Blackie swung down. Jude sat his horse. He saw the girl's eyes go down to the two crumpled bodies, lying just as they had fallen, the Sharps rifle by Tabor's dead right hand. It was still cocked.

"What are you doing here, young lady?" Travers asked sharply. "This is no place for you."

"I wanted to come and I came," she answered.

HER father ignored her and looked at Blackie, who was swinging down. The deputy strode over and looked at the sprawled bodies. The flies already were at work. Cic had swung down too. He came over and took position, explaining how and what had happened.

"I was standin' here with my gunbelt off with Tabor gettin' ready to let go with thet Sharps," he said. " 'Bout that time we heard a horse on the ridge up there an' Jude hove in sight. We was hid by these mesquites. He come on down an' rode right up on us, his right side to us. That gun sheath on the left side of the saddle was outa sight. Tabor lined the Sharps on him an' said as how he should drop his belt. Said he was a friend of Harrison's an' that this was out for Jude. Jude dropped his belt with his right hand. Then he let go with that other gun on the off side of his horse. He got Tabor center with the first shot but the sorrel dumped him an' Frank there spun around an' started shootin'. I was jumpin' for Frank until I saw Jude let go from where he lay on the ground. I damn well kept outa line of fire," he added.

Blackie took off his hat and fanned at the flies around Tabor's open mouth, his eyes on the Sharps. He stepped over and pcked up Frank Jergen's gun examining it critically.

"Two shots fired," he said.

Cic nodded. He was still a little belligerent at the thought that Jude might be arrested. "He thumbed 'em at Jude when he came off that pitching sorrel," he said.

Blackie tossed the gun back to the ground. He looked into Travers' questioning eyes. "Hell, you called me out on a twenty-four mile ride for *this*? It was a waste of time. Let's get back to the ranch."

"I'll send a couple of the boys down in the morning to bury them." Travers said. He strode to his horse and swung up, Nute Shelby following.

It was after dark when they got back to the ranch. Jude unsaddled, put his saddle under the shed, divested himself of chaps, and went over to the cook house. Pokey and Ike were finishing up the dishes and getting things ready for breakfast. Admiral Big Bottom was stalking along the length of the tables. He gave Jude a beady glare.

"An we threw the bloomin' bos'n in the ocean," he croaked.

"Got any supper left?" Jude asked. "We got in kind of late."

He extended a forefinger toward the beady-eyed Admiral and Ike let out a yell of warning. But the Admiral had put forth a horny claw and came up. He worked his way to Jude's shoulder, while Ike stood staring.

"Well, I'll be blowed," spluttered the ex-galley cook. "First time he ever failed to take a finger off any strange swab. Sure, we got some supper for you, matey. So you let go with a broadside at them pirates, heh? Sunk 'em with the first shot? Sent 'em down with their masts busted. Good boy. That'll teach 'em not to go buccaneering in shallow waters."

Pokey shot him a hard glance of warning. These were the kind of things a man didn't want mentioned.

"Yu talk too much," he snarled, reaching for a clean plate. "Yu an' thet dam' bird too. We got some butter beans an' ham hocks left, Jude. The coffee's still warm. I expect I can find a mite of apple pie fer yu too."

Jude lifted the squawking and protesting Admiral down to the table's scrubbed top and ate. The Admiral stood by, eyeing the food.

Jude ate, and Ike, busy with the last of the dishes, said, "He's been actin' strange lately. Like as maybe there's a hurricane coming up."

Jude didn't answer. He ate silently, as most punchers did. Finally he pushed back his plate. He rose and picked it up, carrying it and the other utensels to the big dish pan.

"I'll give you a hand, if you want," he said.

Pokey shook his head. "We're about through. I seen Blackie an' heard his voice when he rid in. He arrestin' yu fer thet fuss on the south line this mornin'?" he demanded, the same belligerency in his tone that Cic had displayed.

Jude shook his head and rolled a cigarette.

"It's a dam' good thing," glared the cook, and the newly washed dishes clattered as he slid them over onto a table to be dried by Ike.

JUDE went back to the bunkhouse. There were two poker games in progress. They ceased at his entrance, and again he felt that sharp pain of lonliness go through him. He wanted to be one of them, to listen, to learn, to take part in the arguments, sometimes ribald, that were a part of bunkhouse life, but there was a gulf between them; a gulf made by three dead men. They were punchers who wore guns out of sheer self protection; he was the man who had killed three rustlers.

Mike said, "Hello, Jude. Come on over and get in this poker game before these polecats take me for my month's wages. Let's you and me double up and split our winnings. We'll take 'em."

"I'm not much of a hand at poker, Mike," Jude confessed. "Matter of fact, I've never played cards before. Don't even know how."

That one didn't decrease the silence. They had interpreted wrong again. This killer from Kansas was either too good to play with them or he'd spent so much time with guns that he hadn't learned to play.

"But I'll set in, if you'll show me," Jude smiled.

That one brought relaxation and a few short laughs. Jude pulled his money out of a pants pocket and started over. Then Blackie's figure filled the open doorway. Greetings and exclamations rose. They bantered at him, gibed at him, jeered about the star on his shirt front, and made scathing remarks about a good puncher being so lazy he wouldn't work anymore.

"Take it easy, boys, I got somebody with me," Blackie smiled, and nodded toward the doorway. Nell had accompanied him down to the bunkhouse. The awkward silence came again and Jude was glad. The silence was because of the presence of the girl. Such a thing had never happened since her return from back east.

Blackie sensed it and said, "I just wanted to talk with Jude for a moment. Want to take a walk Jude?"

"Sure," Jude replied, turning.

Mike and Cic and Slim Connors had risen simultaneously. Blackie caught the chilled looks in their eyes and grinned.

"Jude's in the clear, boys. This is personal. Don't forget that he's my pardner."

Jude followed him out and the girl fell in beside them, Blackie gallantly taking her arm. They went over toward where the outlines of one of the huge freight wagons could be seen against the sky.

"I haven't seen you much lately," Jude remarked to make conversation.

"We've been busier than you think. That's why I wanted to talk with you. Sit down, Jude."

They were at the wagon. Nell primly seated herself on the lowered tongue where the double trees crossed its base and Blackie sat next to her. Jude took seat and rolled a cigarette. The flame of the match lit up his young face for a brief moment before it flared into darkness again, blown out. He pulled on the quirly.

"What did you want to see me about, Blackie?" he asked quietly.

"Not what you think. The Tabor and Jergens business is finished. You did what any good cowhand would have done. I'd have thrown them the same way you did, had I been in your boots. Self preservation is the first law of nature. Only thing is you threw that gun like lightning. You got Tabor and then Jergens, and we'll let the matter rest there. But the Nester Pool is out to get you, Jude. Everytime you line a ridge you can expect a rifle shot. Tabor was one of their best, next to Red Tolliver, who's now their leader. So I've got to protect you, Jude. I can do that in only one way."

How?"

"By pinning a deputy sheriff's badge on you. You can work with me—the Lord knowing we need another man in the office. I can swing it with Jim. After this fracas today your reputation will grow. These nesters will give you a wide berth with that star on your shirt. They won't dare drop you like they will now at the first opportunity. What do you say, pardner?"

Jude pulled on the half smoked length of the rolled cigarette. The red glow of the tip lit up his serious young face. He sent the butt sailing in a red arc, into the darkness twenty feet away. He rose to his feet.

"Thanks for the offer, Blackie. But I want to learn the cow business. I can't do it, siding you with a reputation I don't deserve. I can't learn it hiding back of a lawman's badge. I'll stick here, I reckon, and take my chances."

"But you're refusing!" Nell Travers' indignant voice said in the darkness. "You can't do that!"

"Yes, I can," came the reply through the darkness. "I'm going to become a cowman not an officer of the law. Thanks for the offer, Blackie. I appreciate it. I'll watch the ridges and and if I have to high tail it, I'll do it. But I'm still going to become a cowman."

HE SAID good night and left them there on the wagon tongue, aware that Blackie's arm was around the girl and that he was making love to her.

Jude thought of Edwina in town and something chilled inside of him. He didn't know what or why. He wondered if Blackie was his "pardner" after all; if a man didn't have to make his own trails. Blackie's influence over him was still strong, but he knew that he'd have to make his own way; work out his own destiny. Where it would lead he didn't know. He looked back again.

Blackie was kissing the girl, and Jude went inside and went to bed.

CHAPTER XXII

THE roundup got under way a few weeks later, Pokey rumbling out of the ranch yard in the heavily loaded chuckwagon, followed by Joe in the bedroll wagon. Peanut remained behind to continue superivision of the new home, which was making good progress. There was to be a big housewarming when the job was done, Nell Travers sending invitations to a couple of girls who had attended school with her. They were coming out with their families.

The outfit camped ten miles southwest of the home ranch that first night, and the next morning Jude began learning first hand the meaning of the word *cow puncher*. Under Shelby's crisp orders twenty-two men began loping off in pairs to comb a designated section of the mesquite country and throw everything back toward where the main herd and the cutout would be held. There would be some branding but not much; just to catch what had been missed in the spring, or calf, roundup. For this was the beef roundup. The cutouts, prime beef stuff, would be thrown onto the north range and grazed there during the winter and spring before starting up the trail to Kansas.

With Mike Kessler siding him, Jude went into the gullies that morning and went to work. He kept a sharp lookout, for this was close to nester country, and nobody had forgotten their threats. Davis, the pardner of Frank Jergens, had openly

sworn to shoot Jude on sight. He had disappeared from his job the day following the shooting and gone over to the nesters with whom he'd formerly worked hand in glove, stealing his boss's own cattle. Reports had it that he was living on Tabor's place, married to the nester girl he'd been courting while working in the line camp.

All morning long Jude and Mike combed them out of the brush, cows, calves, bulls and steers. Jude shot one bull that morning with his pistol, a stringy scrub fully a fourth smaller than the regular breeders. Travers wanted no runty stuff among his brand. The herd grew as trickles of cattle came in from all points of the compass. The bawling increased and a string of riders continually loped toward the remuda corral to get fresh mounts out of their string. Shelby fired one rider that morning for bloodying the sides of his horse, paying off the man and ordering him to drift. There was no room on the T4 for such a hand. At noon Jude loped in and ate, hungry and dusty, a streak on one cheek where he'd been struck by a limb while plunging down the side of a gulley after a wild steer. He took time out to smoke, saddled the cream sorrel now one of his string, and went back to the brush.

It went on for days. They worked, ate, rolled into their tarps at night too tired for conversation, and slept hard. Jude took his share of night herding, went his way in silence, and learned fast. If he was aware of Shelby's sharp approving eyes, he paid no heed. Or if he was aware that the others watched him with sidewise glances when they thought he wasn't looking, he ignored it. He was in the business he had set out to learn, doing a job that, despite its rigors, he loved.

"That kid," Shelby said to Travers, "goes at his job like a top hand. Give him a little more seasoning at the calf roundup next spring and he'll hold his own with any man of the outfit."

"I know, Nute. I hope he don't get itchy feet and drift like some of these hands'll do. I want to put him in a line camp up north this winter; with an older man, somebody like Cic. Them nesters up in that country won't be as hostile as the ones on the south boundary. Not near as much chance of a slug in the back. I haven't made it public yet, Nute, but I've been talkin' with Hensen. He's going to make some kind of a count on his roundup, and I wouldn't be surprised if I don't own his iron one of these days. Him and his wife are going to build a house in town and live there this winter."

Shelby pursed his lips thoughtfully. They were sitting their mounts on a rise about a quarter of a mile from where the herd milled and bawled and the dust rose. Taking over Hensen's brand meant more responsibility and appointing of one of the men as foreman of the new outfit. Shelby was already turning over in his mind who the man would be when they rode in to camp and ate dinner.

The cutout had more than two hundred head of cows with unbranded calves that had been missed in the spring, and that afternoon they started branding on the open plain. Riders went in with swinging ropes and came out with bawling, husky yearlings in the loops, dragging them over to where sweating men swore and gibed at each other.

"Hot iron, hot iron," Mike jeered at the disgruntled tender of the branding fire. "This thing ain't any warmer than one of Pokey's biscuits. It won't even singe the hair."

"Yah?" snarled the other. "Then suppose you bent over and lemme test it against the seat of yore pants. I'll bet yuh a month's pay yuh beller louder than any damn bull in the herd."

Mike tossed back the odorous iron, released the yearling, then went in after another and much larger one. He lost his footing and went down under the frantically struggling animal and roars of laughter drowned out his oaths.

"Haw-haw-haw!" jeered the tender of the branding fire, triumphantly. "It's hard to tell which is the yearlin' an' which is Mike. They both of 'em got the same kind of foolish look on their faces. Come to think of it," he added sagely to Jude and another young puncher called "Tow-Head," "they even looks alike. Same shape ears, same eyes, and the same shaped noses. An' both of their whiskers is red. Why, the way they're layin' there slobberin' over each other you'd think they wuz brothers."

JUDE wiped tears of laughter from his eyes and went in with Tow-Head, the two of them flanking for Mike. They got the

yearling off the unfortunate puncher and Mike came to his feet, limping and swearing. He wiped calf slobbers from his face.

"Yep," went on the man at the branding fire, "I never see any puncher git so plumb affectionate. There they wuz, a-layin' in each other's arm's a-huggin' and' a-kissin' each other on the noses. I allus thought cow punchers didn't love the critters but Miz Kessler's un-favorite son is shore different. Mike feels so plumb sorry at havin' to hurt the critters that he kisses 'em before—"

He ducked and the puncher with the calf on the end of his rope went into convulsions. Jude and Tow-Head held the animal down while Mike, with a final "Go to hell," at his tormenter, went deftly to work with a knife. He put Travers' gotch on the lower edge of the right ear, then leaned back and cut again. Two objects were dropped into a pail already half filled. That night they would all have "mountain oysters' for supper, cooked as only Pokey could cook them, and a cow camp delicacy.

Mike stamped a neat "T" on the animal's hip, laid a "4" beside it. Two clouds of pungent grey smoke went up and the emasculated yearling let out double bawls of pain. It went loping spraddle-legged back into the herd to find its bellowing mother, and five minutes later was taking on nourishment, its long-horned mother smelling and then licking it suspiciously.

Mike tossed back the irons and watched it go. "Two or three years from now he'll be in a freight car, heading for Kansas City to make rump steaks."

"He will if the blow flies don't get at him," Tow-Head, big and husky and good-natured, said. "This weather's purty warm for cuttin'."

"That's your job to see he don't get 'em, boy," Mike retorted.

"Oh, no," Tow-Head grinned hastily. "After all the affection yuh showed that critter I wouldn't think of lettin' anybody but *yuh* look after him."

They finished the branding and the beef cutout and moved on, northward this time, rounding up on the prairie within three miles of Alden. Shelby seemed to be everywhere at once, giving orders, directing operations, and seemingly always making marks in a tally book. Hensen had ridden down with three of his men and driven back some thirty head of his stuff that had drifted south from Duck Creek. He was to begin his roundup the following week or ten days, and he with Travers and Shelby had been in serious huddles.

At the time Hensen had established his iron and began putting it on all the unbranded stuff on the prairies, as other men all over Texas were doing, there had been no thought of rustling. There had been no reason for it. A man didn't have to steal a cow bearing another man's iron where there were plenty of unbranded stuff for the taking. But with the coming of the railroad into Kansas the free stuff was gone, mostly all under iron now, and then was when rustling began.

Hensen, an honest man himself, hadn't thought to devise an iron that would be tough on the brand blotters—and in which he differed very much from Travers. Travers' T4 was as hard to work over with a running iron as Hensen's H Bar (H—) was easy.

And it had been the sharp-eyed Cic who had spotted the critter. Jude was with them when they roped and tied the animal. Shelby rolled it over on its other side, a husky two-year old heifer.

He bent and parted the red hair, running his finger over the freshly healed scab. The brand was an 8 Cross (8^+) now.

"About two weeks ago, I'd say," he grunted to Hensen. "A damned crude job, too. Any of them nesters up there running an Eight Cross iron?"

HENSEN shook his snow white head, a man full seventy years old and still strong in the saddle. "Never heard of any, Nute. But then they come an' go an' sell out to each other all the time. Most of their brands ain't even registered."

"Probably not. Well, the man who did this job was either an amateur at the game or a puncher who was mighty careless. He probably drove the animal off your range an' then it got away from him an' drifted back. Looks like to me that if you sell out to Harry we'll have our work cut out for us. Rustlers on the north and south boundaries with thirty miles of open range to draw from. What about your men?" he added sharply.

"All honest as far as I know, Nute. They don't go much for nesters."

Nute Shelby rose, freeing the animal's four tied feet. They all swung up.

"How's your tally showing up?" Hensen inquired.

"Short," snapped the foreman. "A good three hundred head under what I estimated from the calf roundup last spring. And it's most grown stuff. If Jim Underhill and Blackie don't put a stop to this rustling I'm going to! I'll do it if I have to take a hundred men and burn every nester shack within fifty miles."

"That's one reason I'm selling out, Nute. I'm gettin' a mite old to be mixed up in a range war. The nesters are gettin' bigger all the time, even startin' a fair sized outfit on what I allus figgered was my south range. But they've got as much legal right on that land as me an' the Missus have because it's state land."

"They haven't got any right on *mine*!" snapped out Travers. "I fought Indians in this country when there wasn't a town here. My mother is buried with four miles of here, her head split open with a Commanche tommahawk. I settled this range. I rode it as a kid, tending my father's ponies and keeping a sharp lookout for the red devils to top the ridges. Twice they chased me almost to the house at a run and then drove off the ponies. After the war I went south to where the cattle were thicker and fought tooth and nail to get my outfit going. I was so poor I couldn't even put a herd up the trail until this year. This is my range and I'll fight to hold it. It's a hell of a note when a man has to put line camps less than ten miles apart to prevent open cattle stealing in broad daylight.

"Come on, Nute. Let's go in town and have a talk with Jim Underhill and Blackie."

CHAPTER XXIII

BOTH Underhill and his deputy were in the office when the two men rode in. The sheriff just a few minutes before had come in with a handcuffed Mexican prisoner, the man having killed another Mexican in their herder camp several miles over in the bad country. He would be confined to the cell of the wooden jail until the circuit judge came in to hear his trial.

"Hello, boys," the sheriff greeted. "How's things going on the roundup? Looks like a lot of cows out there."

"A few," Nute said.

"Sit down boys?" Blackie invited, nodding toward chairs. "How much longer will it take you to finish?"

Travers pushed back his hat as he sat down. "Not very long. And if those nesters keep rustling us at the rate they're doing we won't have enough left by next year."

"I know," Underhill put in. "I've got to play neutral and not take sides. But I'm personally for the cowmen. Yet you show me any proof that I can sink my teeth into and I'll go after any man, nester or puncher, who's rustling. I wish I had more help. One of us has to stay in the office most of the time and it's no easy job the way we're on the go. They haven't even got a town marshal here, so that means that after a man's rid a horse all day long he's got to spend a few hours makin' the rounds of the saloons to stop fights. Then on Saturday nights when we have a dance it means staying up some sometimes 'til they dance themselves out at daylight an' decide to go home."

"Maybe we'd better talk to the commissioners and see about a couple of more deputies," Travers agreed. "Because if something ain't done about this rustling I'm going after them with guns. We're near three hundred head short on the tally so far since the calf roundup last spring. Prime stuff, most of it, with about sixty or seventy cows that should have big calves follerin' 'em being calfless. There's one roan cow in particular that I remember having a nice big bull calf with a white splotch on its shoulder. Her calf's gone. Three hundred head, Jim!"

Underhill whistled. The men of the Nester Pool were getting bolder. And what made it worse was that if you got the proof and went out and arrested one, they'd insist on a few nesters as jurymen—which automatically would bring about a hung jury. The thing would drag on and finally blow up in smoke.

The sheriff said so.

"I know it," Shelby said in his curt voice. "But we've got to do something, Jim. We've got about seven hundred head of long horn cattle running on a range of about thirty miles. It's a big outfit and'll get bigger. I suppose you heard that Harry's taking over Hensen's outfit on Duck Creek and adding it to the T4? Well, even an outfit that big can't stand being rustled at the rate we are. A few

years of that, plus drouth or maybe a bad drop in prices will put the T4 under as quick as though it was a small outfit. We'll buckle right in the middle."

Underhill sighed. His feet were hurting him and he wanted to go home and crawl into a good hot bath and curse himself for ever letting them elect him as sheriff.

"You ever hear of an Eight Cross iron?" Travers demanded.

Underhill shook his head. "New one on me."

He told about the job of brand blotting they had found on the Hensen critter that day.

Blackie spoke up, reaching for cigarette papers and tobacco sack in the breast pocket of the red shirt. The shirt contrasted beautifully with his pitch black hair and handsome, freshly shaved face.

"Eight Cross?"

"Yeah?"

"I think that's an outfit just starting up about forty miles northwest of here, up in the Cap Rock country. Now that I'm packing this badge I can stop in at a nester's place for a drink of water without getting my head shot at."

"So you heard something?" grunted Shelby.

"Yes, I heard something, Nute," Blackie said slowly, looking at him steadily. "The nesters say that these big ranches the size of a Spanish land grant have to go—make room for smaller outfits. They say it's not right that a few big owners should have a two or three hundred mile stretch of open range, hogging up land they don't own and keeping the little fellows out. So the Cross Eight is being built. New bunkhouse and corrals. They got water up there and they're starting with about two hundred head, supposedly bought."

"Supposedly, hell!" exploded Travers, his face contorting with dark anger. "Half of those cows are either mine or Hensen's. The others came from the big outfits far to the north. But it *is* a nester ranch, eh? You're sure?"

"Not only that," Blackie replied, licking the paper. "But down on your south boundary, Harry, Red Tolliver has pushed old man Treddle back and just walked in and took over part of his grass. He bought out a couple of families that are going back to Missouri and moved the houses over to his own for bunkhouses. He's got five nesters riding for him as full time punchers, looking out after the pool stuff on that new range. You see what they're doing? First it was the Comanches on these prairies. They've been pretty well whipped out. Next you cowmen took over a range and held it. Now it's the nesters moving in—settlers, they call themselves—and shoving you out. It's not only happening here; it's happening all over the country, nester kids are growing up who won't touch a plow. They ride a horse. A new crop of punchers coming on, getting started like a lot of men get started—swinging a long loop on somebody else's stuff. And there's nothing on God's green earth you can do about it. You shoot one and another pop's up like a steer outa the brush and takes his place. You've got about twenty-five men and they've got two hundred, and some of them are bad men with a gun and not afraid of the devil himself. If you make it open range war to see who survives, you'll go under, Harry. Your range gone, your cattle rustled, and three chances to one losing your own life."

THE three had sat and listened to him, and it was pretty obvious from the thoughtful look on Travers' face that the shot had gone home. He knew that Blackie was telling the truth. Underhill stirred and sighed with weariness from the long ride to pick up the Mexican prisoner.

"I didn't want to come out in the open and say it, boys, but Blackie sure hit the spike on the head. But I repeat what I said—I'm for the cowmen, and you get me any proof that some certain man or men are guilty and I'll go after them. If I can't bring them back alive, then I'll do it dead."

"They'll never take my range. I'll hold it. I'll hold every foot of it if I have to hire a hundred punchers to ride it with rifles on the saddles. They'll never take my range."

"Well," shrugged Blackie, "it's your ruckus, Harry. We'll back you as far as the law and our limited means will go. But you're fighting men who were at Bull Run and Gettysburg and Richmond with rifles in their hands. Men from both sides who can, and will, kill. You're bucking a stacked deck, Harry."

Travers got up and paced one turn down the confines of the room. It was going to be tough, but he thought he could pull through ahead of them and hold his range.

But he was a badly worried man over what Blackie had said and the deputy saw the look on his face.

"I could make a suggestion," Blackie smiled up at him. "It might be a way out I don't want to make it on account of knowing how touchy you are about the range."

"What is it?"

"It's better to play safe and lose some than to buck a deck and lose more. I'd suggest that you let me arrange to meet with a committee of nesters from the south and a committee over on your north and western boundaries. Pull back a few miles and cut a definite boundary and agree to let them get started. They —"

"Hell no!" exploded Travers angrily. "Give 'em an inch and they'd crowd a foot."

"Then buy your land and establish definite ownership."

Travers stared at him aghast. "Buy it?" he almost roared. "*Buy it?* Did the Comanches pay anything for it? Are the nesters payin' anything for it? Hundred and hundreds of miles of open range all over Texas, free for the taking, and I'm supposed to *pay* for it! I never heard of anything so dam' silly in all my life, spending money for *land!*"

Blackie's wiry shoulders shrugged. "All right, Harry, I won't say any more. But that's what the new Cross Eight outfit is doing, getting title to land for a few pennies an acre. They've had surveyors on your northwest range and the line will run about three miles inside what you figure is your boundary. They're buying *your* range with the money they got from that rustled NP herd they took to Abilene. They bought a hundred and sixty acres on the place where they're putting up the ranch house. They're spreading their money thin, leaving all the land *in between.* I know all this for a fact because since I've been packing this badge I've got around quite a bit. I've learned things. When the deeds come through from the State Land Office they'll own part of your range."

"The devil they will! The first nester who crosses that boundary will get his head shot off. I'll go up there with a dozen men and burn that place down."

Blackie got up, his eyes cold. Travers didn't know it, of course, but it was Blackie himself who was Cross Eight and owned that land.

"When you do, Harry, the State of Texas'll say that Jim and myself will have to come after you with a warrant for your arrest."

He got up and went out, strolling up the street. Red Tolliver stood leaning against a doorjamb with his big belly protruding past the wall. There was nobody around and Blackie paused briefly.

"I just saw Travers an' Nute Shelby in town a little while ago," Red said, his lashless lids opaque.

"They're in the office, considerably upset over a three hundred steer and calf shortage. And one of Hensen's drifters showed up in the T4 roundup with brand made over into a Cross Eight so crudely done it looked like even the kids are trying their hand at rustling. Tell those fools to be careful!"

Tolliver grinned. "Sorta upset, hey?"

"Travers? Plenty. But we've got him worried and just about where we can start to work. He bought Hensen's Duck Creek outfit—or is going to buy it right away. We'll have him spread out thin, where we want him. Give me five years and we'll have his range broken up into nothing, with small spreads all over it."

"And you owning the Cross Eight, biggest of the bunch," grinned the rustler. "Yo're near as much of a plain blackguard as I am, Blackie."

Blackie smiled at that one. "More so, Red. *You're* an honest one!"

He went on up the street, pleased with the world and himself. Jim Underhill had repeatedly said he would not run for a second term as sheriff. That job Blackie would get. When the time came he would be in the political saddle, handling the law on one side and the rustling on the other. He could afford to come out into the open and assert his power, for that was what Blackie wanted. Power. Once he attained it he would whip the nesters off and expand his Cross Eight brand; a brand he had carefully failed to register. Just surround himself with the right kind of men and he would control this whole section of the country.

HE thought of Jude. He'd have to get Jude on as one of the new deputies. That young puncher from Kansas had spunk; Blackie had noted it from the first

day they met. Train him right—use influence over him—and he'd become a trained instrument to exterminate those who got in the way.

Blackie passed Edwina's new dress shop and went in. She was alone, busy fitting a dress to a dummy. He looked at her golden head and lovely face and the old desire came up in him. But there was nothing more than desire. He was going to marry Nell Travers some day, when the ranch of her father was reduced to a fraction of its former size and he controlling that eventually.

"Hello, sweet," he smiled.

"How are you, Blackie?"

"Busy, but never too busy to come see the prettiest girl in the country who doesn't love me anymore. I still think you're wasting your time in here with this foolish idea of pins and needles and thread when you could be singing at one of the places here in town."

"I sang in those public places because I loved to sing. I still do," she answered. "But I'm a dressmaker now."

"I'll be in and see you tonight."

She shook her head. "No, you won't, Blackie. I belonged to you because I believed in you. I was your woman. I'm not anymore."

He started to say something but a bootstep sounded in the doorway and they both turned.

It was Jude.

CHAPTER XXIV

JUDE had broken a cinch that afternoon in a hard run down a draw after a bunch quitting steer. The horse had almost fallen with him, but the cinch had let go and given him a bad spill. There hadn't been an extra one in the outfit, so the straw boss in charge during Nute's absence had told him to come on in and get himself a new one and bring back some extras from Sol's store. But it being late and Jude not due for night trick that night he could stay in town so long as he got back the next morning. So Jude had made a makeshift cinch of rope and ridden into town.

"Jude!" Edwina exclaimed and advanced toward him, holding out both hands. "I'm glad to see you again."

He greeted Blackie, who hadn't missed the affection on her part.

"Hello, cow puncher." The deputy grinned. "How's the cow punching business?"

"Pretty good, Blackie. We're just about through. But I busted a cinch and rode in to get a new one."

"You'll learn the hard way, boy. That deputy's job will be open pretty soon. I need a man I can trust to side me."

Jude shook his head. "Thanks, but I'll stick with Travers. Well," he said awkwardly, "I'd better get going. I just saw you two in here and stopped by. Got to get a haircut. See you later," and he turned to go out.

"One minute, Jude," Blackie said sharply.

Jude turned.

"Red Tolliver is down the street. Don't forget that he was a friend of Harrison and Tabor. No gun fighting."

"I'm not aiming to," Jude answered and went out. He swung aboard the horse and went to Sols, going around the back way. He went inside across the loading platform. The first person he saw was Nell Travers. She greeted him with unexpected warmth.

He touched his hand to his hat brim and returned the greeting, the lonesomeness and hunger of all cowboys stirring through him. She was beautiful, hers a different kind from that of Edwina; and this was the first time she'd ever unbent from those "hifalutin" ways her father spoke of. Ranch life was taking her back to its bosom again.

"I saw Blackie up the street," he said to relieve his awkwardness.

He was surprised at the rise in her. She said coolly, "I don't care if you did. Blackie's a little too vain over his good looks and deputy sheriff's badge. He thinks that all he's got to do is to look at a girl and she'll fall over in a faint. It's about time he found out different. Are you staying in for the dance tonight? Mother and I are. We drove in in the buggy."

He hadn't known about the dance. Back in Kansas the farmers usually got together about every other week-end and threw a dance, and dancing was something that Jude enjoyed. But this was the first time he realized that it was Saturday again. Men lost track of time on a roundup.

"I reckon I might," he said, and then

Sol came up.

"Hello, young fellow," he greeted, extending a hand. "I thought all of the T4 hands were busy at the roundup."

"I broke a cinch," Jude said. "Came in to get a new one and some extras."

"Sure. Up front here."

Jude followed him, leaving the girl. The store was pretty busy, for many people were in town. A cow puncher looked at him hard but Jude paid no attention. He didn't know at the time that this was Davis, former line camp pardner of Jergens, one of the two men Jude had shot that other morning. Nester women and children bought, and gossiped as they bought, while ranchers and cow punchers, coldly aloof, discussed water, the condition of the range, and the probable prices of fall beef.

Jude got the cinches and went out to his horse. He untied the improvised rope girth, fitted the new cinch, resaddled, and tied the others back of the cantle. By the time he put the horse in the livery and got a haircut and shave at the barbershop it was dark. He ate and strolled up the street. A man passed him. Red Tolliver. Tolliver went by without speaking.

Jude passed on up the boardwalk past Edwina's shop. It was dark. He felt lonely and out of place, despite the fact that just across the square, in an abandoned store building, the lights were on and the fiddlers were tuning up for the first square dance. The crowd was building up inside, both nesters and punchers from the outlying ranches. This was one place where they all met on common ground. During a dance everything else was forgotten. There was, of course, the usual number of fights; they were inevitable when some young rider showed too many marked attentions to a pretty nester girl and one of her men folks took it up. Jude strolled over, figuring he'd have a few turns. He considered himself a pretty good square dancer. He'd certainly had enough practice.

His eyes searched the crowd for familiar faces. He saw only Mrs. Travers and Nell, the latter in a new dress. Nute Shelby was in earnest conversation with an elderly looking cowman and Travers was over, laughing and talking with one of the tuning-up fiddlers. Then a man walked out into the middle of the floor and yelled, "Get your pardners fer the first square dance."

JUDE stood on the outside, looking in through the doors, which were crowded with the usual number of bashful swains. Some would soon get up enough nerve to go in and start asking pardners; the others would stand outside during the course of the dance and then go home. Jude turned and walked across the square. The lights of the hotel lobby loomed up before him and some instinct caused him to go in and ask for Edwina's room number. He went up the stairs to the second floor and paused as he heard voices in her room.

It was Blackie.

Jude would have turned away but something in their words rooted his boots to the floor of the hallway.

"Blackie, I told you not to come in here tonight. We've been over all this before," the singer was saying. "Everything is finished between us. I don't care for you anymore. It's all done—over with."

"So you're turning 'respectable?' " came his voice. "Everybody in town knows that you came here with me."

"What they know or think in this town doesn't bother me, Blackie. All I know is that you've played your game your way and that was when I pulled out of it. Gossip gets around, Blackie. They're saying that you're going to become Travers' son-in-law. I wish you luck and I feel sorry for her. Now get out, Blackie."

Jude heard the sharp spat of a hand and a hissing intake of her breath. He was on the verge of turning away, ashamed that he had listened, but something wouldn't let him. He opened the door and went in.

Blackie turned at the sound, his face aflame with anger at both the girl and the interruption, and Jude knew in this moment that he was seeing the deputy in a new light. Blackie was handsome, devil-may-care, and had been his "pardner." But this was a juvenile something that was gone now; it never had existed.

Blackie recovered himself with a smile.

"Hello, Jude," he said casually. "Don't tell me you're coming up to take Edwina to the dance?"

"I sorta figured on something like that," Jude lied. Actually he had wanted to just talk with her to cover the loneliness eating at him. He had no friends except Mike and Cic and Pokey, and perhaps Nute Shelby, the three dead men of the Nester Pool putting a chasm between himself and the

easy relations prevalent among the rest of the men of the outfit. He merely had been lonesome. He knew that Edwina was Blackie's woman, and the knowledge had kept from his mind any other thought than just being a good friend.

"I'm glad you came, Jude," Edwina said hurriedly, recovering her poise. "Blackie's in a mean mood tonight."

"I wasn't aimin' to intrude."

"I'm glad you did. If you'll wait a few minutes until I fix up a bit I'll go with you."

She disappeared into another room, closing the door back of her. Blackie grinned ruefully and looked at Jude.

"She's sorta on the prod lately," he explained. "Don't know what's got into her. Jude, that offer to come in with me is still open. I told you in Abilene that if you'd stick with me you'd be a rich man some day. It still goes. I've got plans. How about quitting when the roundup is over and coming into town?"

"I think I'll stick, Blackie."

The deputy's eyes glinted a little. "Jude, it's going to be a showdown between the cowmen and nesters one of these days and the cowmen are going to lose. These nesters are turning ranchers now and pushing in on the ranges. Travers might not be able to hold his ranges."

"He's still paying me my wages," Jude answered.

"Like that, eh? All right, Jude. But it might mean a range war and the law will have to be impartial."

It was clearly a warning. The implication in the words couldn't be anything else.

"I'll have to wait until it comes and do what I feel is right," Jude answered. "A man's supposed to be loyal to his outfit, Blackie."

The deputy rose. He nodded. "I hope you don't have to kill anymore men, Jude. The law is getting claws these days. The Texas Rangers are dropping through here more and more. Maybe I can't protect you next time as I did. Well, anyhow," he finished, laughing, "take good care of Edwina at the dance. The womenfolk will probably stare at you for bringing her."

"Is that why you never took her anyplace?" Jude asked.

"I don't like that kind of talk, Jude," Blackie said sharply, no laughter in his eyes now.

"Neither do I. Let's forget it."

"Sure, let's forget it."

Blackie went out and closed the door behind him. Edwina's voice said, "Is he gone?"

"I reckon."

"Jude, come in here and help me with this new dress. I've decided to change. I need help."

HE went into her bedroom, that strange constriction hitting his stomach at sight of her getting ready to put the new one on over head. She was in petticoat. She paused and as he came closer something happened to her. She looked at him, and then took his young face between her hands, dropping the dress.

She kissed him squarely on the lips. "Jude, come to me," she whispered.

"No," he said, and he thought of his mother, of Nell Travers' face as he had last seen her over in the dancehall.

He went out, back to the livery, saddled up his horse and returned to the outfit.

CHAPTER XXV

THE outfit finished the roundup and rolled back into the home ranch. The nights were getting cold now. Jude worked at the ranch for a few more weeks as the days grew shorter and the mornings bit harder into them when they went out to saddle up. The horses knew it too, giving evidence of bucking just a little harder mornings to warm up. Slim Connors had brought in a batch of geldings and was breaking them down in one of the big circular corrals. And Connors knew his business.

Again the astute Nute Shelby showed his hand. Jude had come out of the roundup as one of the best riders of the outfit. He had learned much about working a cow horse and how to handle the wild longhorns in the brush. But Shelby, realizing his capabilities, wanted to complete his education.

He put Jude down into the corral, working with Slim Connors for a couple of weeks. It was interesting work and he loved it; for, like so many bronk stompers, Connors had a way with horses. It was amazing what he could do with one of the wild bunch. He was the school master, starting his green charges in at the begin-

ning, progressing them slowly, and gradually letting them know who was master. He showed Jude how to put a bridle and saddle on one of them with two long lariats attached to the bit and run back through the stirrups. Jude stood in the center of the corral, the ropes in his strong young hands, and let the animal learn what a bit and reins were for. Sometimes Nell Travers came out to sit on the fence and watch. The big house was almost finished; it would take a few more weeks to do the painting. It was to be all white with green trimmed window casings and shutters.

He hadn't seen Edwina since that night, for he remembered the pain in Edwina's eyes when he had left her and not gone to the dance; she thought it was because she'd been Blackie's woman.

And Nell Travers had changed much. She had turned seventeen now and was growing into full blown beauty; and the months at the ranch had brought on the transformation her father had hoped for.

The side saddle was collecting dust under one of the sheds. She rode astraddle using a split leather skirt, and she bantered with the men. It was only when she talked to Jude that her attitude was different. All the old petulance was gone. She greeted him openly and in friendliness.

"The trouble with you, Jude," she said one day, "is that you're too damned polite to me because of my position." He was coming out of the corral.

"That's not the kind of language the boss's daughter is supposed to use," he answered. "Ladies who go to finishing schools don't use it."

She laughed, the tones clear and bell-like, her young breasts beneath the man's flannel shirt rising high. He could see the healthy curve of her neck and throat, soft and alluring.

"But perhaps I'm not a lady, Jude. And do you know what: I shudder to think what my friends will say when they arrive for the house warming party and barbecue we're giving when the new place is done. Pa says I've lost that thin skin of 'culture' they put on me back East and am just another Texas ranch gal."

"You mentioned friends. Who are they?"

She got down off the fence and dropped in beside him as he carried his gear toward the saddle shed. It was nearly noon and time to eat. She shot him a side glance from her green eyes.

"Do you know something? In all the months on this ranch you've never called me by my name."

"I seem to recollect," he said, "that you gave orders for all the hands to address you as 'Miss Travers.' "

"Oh, that!" She laughed again. She seemed to be in a capricious mood today. "That went along with the thin skin of 'culture.' I guess I had some pretty hifalutin' ideas when I got back. But I have changed, haven't I?"

He slung the saddle over the saddle rack beneath the shed and put the bridle over the horn. He began divesting himself of his chaps. The chaps and the rest of his gear wasn't new anymore. The saddle was shiny from use and of a much darker hue now and his chaps showed the marks of a thousand thorns and limbs having struck at them.

"I'd say quite a bit," Jude admitted.

"Well, *thank you!*" she said in pretended indignation. "But I have changed. I ride with the men, I eat in the bunkhouse once in a while to get a change from Jessie's cooking, and I dance with all of the hands at the dances in town. That is, all except one. You've never asked me to dance with you, Jude. Last Saturday night you ignored me completely, though I noticed you were doing all right with some of those nester girls."

"They're not much nesters anymore; they're small time cowmen."

"But you still didn't dance with me. But I'll bet if that Edwina Cochran had been there you'd have danced with her—several times."

"I probably would have, Miss Travers."

"Call me Nell, Jude. You like her a lot in spite of her being Blackie's girl, don't you?"

THAT one left her wide open for a shot straight from the shoulder, and because he was getting a little annoyed with her, he took it. "I noticed that you let him make over you that night the two of you were sitting on the wagon tongue. You knew Edwina was his girl then."

She tossed her russet locks. She was getting angry too, but he somehow got the impression that she was enjoying the joust. A rooster crowed in the distance. A buzzard circled lazily in the sky on black

wings. Smoke trailed up from the dining dugout stove pipe, and from the direction of Pokey and Ike's shack came mutterings punctuated by pungent oaths in the language of the sea.

She stopped and faced him. "Blackie needed to be given his come uppence. He thinks that just because he's so handsome and is a sheriff's deputy now that all the girls fall in love with him. So I let him kiss me a couple of times and then stopped him cold. That's all there was to it—but you still like Edwina."

"Very much, Miss Travers."

"Stop that!" she said, plainly angry now. "I told you to call me Nell, Jude. But I still don't like Edwina Cochran because she's Blackie's girl, and I still think you like her a lot better than you let on."

The muttered oaths were still coming from the shack where the two cooks slept. Ike's head appeared in the doorway, beckoned to Jude, and then disappeared once more.

A hoarse, raucous voice said plainly, "Go to hell, you swab." It sounded as though Admiral Big Bottom was on the prod.

"I have respect for her," Jude said. "She fell in love with a man and proved it by coming West with him. She sacrificed her reputation in Alden because she loved a man and believed in him. Your mother married Mr. Travers when he had nothing. She sacrificed four years of her life while he fought through the war. She waited in Texas and made more sacrifices in hard work and patience while he got his spread going. What Edwina did because she loved Blackie is pretty small compared to what your mother did."

He was tired of the argument. He wished that she'd go on up to the ranch house. She was lovely and getting more so every day. She was one of the outfit now and that made him respect her more. But she was still Harry Travers' daughter and he was just one of the hands.

He changed the subject. "You mentioned these friends coming out from the East. Who are they?"

"Well, there's Helen Borden. Her father is some kind of a banker or railroad president or something. Then there's Julie Stanton. I don't know what her father is, but he's terribly rich. Julie wrote me that they all wanted to come west for a few months and see what this country is like. So when I sent an invitation for them all to come and stay for a few weeks and see what life was like on a Texas ranch they all decided to make the trip. They'll be here in time for the house warming."

"Well, I hope you have a good time, Miss Travers," he said, and it was dismissal.

"Don't you dare use that name again, Jude Gordon, or I'll make Pa fire you!" she flared at him and went toward the house.

Ike's head was poking itself out of the doorway again, a tattooed arm beckoning. Jude went in. It was dim inside after the bright glare of the noonday sun. A fly buzzed futiley and stupidly at a dirty window pane, three feet from the open doorway. The Admiral wasn't on his perch. He was over in the middle of Ike's bunk, stalking up and down and making croaking sounds.

Ike swore again and pointed at a small white object.

Admiral Big Bottom, after four years of profane celibacy with Ike, had just laid an egg.

"Ahoy, mate!" the Admiral squawked.

"Look at it!" Ike almost roared. "For four years I took him—I mean her—into the best grog shops in the country and paid for the best. A tough old sea going Admiral, he was. Drink his likker with the best of 'em. An' now the swab has to go and lay an *egg! A she-Admiral,* she is. I never heard such bilge in me life!"

They went toward the dugout with Ike still swearing disgustedly. He knew what he was in for at the hands of the men. They'd never let him forget. Ike was going to find life very miserable around the T4 until the joke wore thin.

Jude went in and ate as the rest of the outfit began trickling in and unsaddling. After dinner Nute Shelby called him over.

Jude and Cic were to saddle up, load their warbags and tarps on pack horses, and head north for a line camp at the tip of Hensen's range, to winter and batch there.

Travers had, the day before, bought the H Bar holdings.

CHAPTER XXVI

JUDE and Cic jogged into town around 3 o'clock that afternoon. They would

stop in the store and buy heavy coats and winter underwear and other necessities for a winter alone in a line camp. Shelby had chosen wisely in having the older man accompany Jude. Putting two men of the same age and temperament in a cabin for an entire winter was often tantamount to inviting death to one of them. "Cabin fever" was a tough problem for any foreman. Two men couped up together night after night get tired of the other's tall tales, repeated over and over again, the drone of the same voice, the shape of his head even. Many a pair had come out in the spring, once former close friends and now bitter enemies; and fights with fists were not uncommon.

Anything to break the monotony of long nights when the wind howled down across the flats and the horses stood humped up under the protection of their sheds.

The two punchers went in through the back of Sol's store to start buying, and Jude saw Edwina. She was purchasing a bolt of goods for dresses. She stood in more solidly with the womenfolk of the town now, because her dresses had proved a stronger lure than reticence to patronize her because of her reputation. Only one woman had carefully avoided the place: Nell Travers.

She gave Jude a brief nod of greeting. There was neither friendliness nor hostility in it. He went over, removing his hat.

"How are you, Jude?" she asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

It made him decidedly uncomfortable. "All right, I guess. Cic and me just stopped in to buy a few things for the cold weather. We're heading for a line camp about thirty miles north."

"Then you won't be back until spring?"

"I guess not. About March or April, I think. In time for the calf roundup."

"In that case, I'll wish you luck. Take good care of yourself."

She turned to the girl and began examining the goods again. Jude went over to where Cic was talking with Sol's son, a slim young man in his twenties. Like his father, he wore spectacles.

A wagon rattled by in the street outside and the buzz of men's talk filled the store. Nesters. They wore cowmen's boots and big hats now, bought from Sol. Cic and Jude made their purchases—on credit until spring—, bought two quarts of whiskey at the saloon next door, and rode out of town.

They wintered on the far tip of the former Hensen range, in a shack that was divided into two rooms, one for bunking and one for cooking. The shack was on a bare knoll, with the sheds for the horses down below in the lee of the crest. The horses would need all the protection they could get when the wind howled and the sleet came driving down slantingly.

In a matter of days they settled into line camp life. It was a matter of getting up after daylight, feeding the horses and cooking breakfast, and then bundling up for the long cold ride to push all the Hensen stuff south and to prevent nester stuff, driven by the cold, from drifting over onto T4 range. Now and then Jude met hard-eyed men on the same job, their small holdings visible far to the north; men who rode by cautiously at a distance of a hundred yards, eyeing the T4 man warily, and sometimes lifting a gloved hand in curt greeting. Once a month Joe, bundled up in the bitter cold, drove by in the bedroll wagon, loaded down with supplies for the camps. He usually stayed overnight, exchanged and passed along the latest gossip, and disappeared over the horizon the next morning.

Things were going pretty good at the home ranch and in town. The winter range was in pretty good shape so far, the cattle holding up well. Travers figgered that, with the addition of Hensen's spread to his holdings, he could put four thousand head up the trail next summer. The furniture for the new house was being freighted in by two big wagons and everybody was looking forward to the barbecue and general celebration when the weather warmed up a bit.

Christmas came, in the face of a howling norther, with rain that turned into burst of hail that rattled off the walls and roof of the cabin. Cic cut a cedar bush and clumsily stuck three candles on it, and then broke out a bottle of whiskey he had been hoarding for months. They sang Christmas carols and wound up by getting pretty drunk. The circuit judge came by Alden, tried a Mexican, and turned him loose. Self defense. No witnesses to prove otherwise.

It was a good winter, Jude thought. He lay in his bunk nights and listened to the wind and thought about Edwina and Nell

Travers and what they were doing. He began to get ideas that perhaps he might drift. This was in mid-January and it had been a perfect winter so far.

Then things changed and came alive with explosions that were to reverberate all over the range. Joe broke the news on one of his monthly trips.

Jim Underhill, the sheriff, had been found two weeks before, up on the edge of the nester country fifteen miles west of Jude's section of the line. He had been dead about a week. A nester had found his horse wandering, half starved and frozen, and back tracked.

The sheriff had been shot through the back with a rifle.

BLACKIE was now acting sheriff and had hired two new deputies. What made it worse, Joe swore profanely, was that they were both nesters.

Jude was genuinely sorry about the death of the sheriff. Underhill had been a good man. He had been pressed into a job he didn't much want, and he had lost his life because of it. Dry gulched.

"So Blackie's gone over to the nesters, eh?" Cic grunted. He reached over and lit a cigarette from the top of the lamp globe on the table. The three of them had just eaten supper and were in the kitchen of the cabin.

"I wouldn't say that," Joe replied. "He said as how he didn't much want the job. But there wasn't anybody else, him bein' the only deputy."

"He coulda hired a couple of good gun packin' *punchers!*" snapped Cic.

"I reckon he could," the limping man agreed. "But what you boys don't realize is that Alden is becoming a nester town. Travers is the only big ranchman who is there, most of the others freightin' from further north an' west. An' these nesters have all got cows now too. I hear that new Cross Eight outfit added four hundred more head."

"Yeah?" grunted Cic narrowly.

"Yep. An' that ain't the worst part. Their surveyors drawed up a line several miles inside what was part of Travers' range juttin' on to Hensen's. An' they bought all thet land legal-like. Owsley—he's the new foreman an' he ain't no nester—though he's got nester punchers—says as how come spring an' his Eight Cross stuff will be headin' right over onto thet new grass. He told Travers plain in Sol's store one day thet he didn't want to see any T4 or H Bar irons on thet grass when they come over with their own stuff."

"What did the boss say?" Jude asked. That disputed land was a part of his assigned line.

The crippled little ex-rider grinned at that one. "Whut would you expect him to say, Jude? He told Owsley an' them four nester punchers with him thet his men would shoot the first cow an' the first rider thet crossed the old boundary."

"Them's our orders?" Cic cut in.

Joe nodded. "I got word fer you two to sorta follow 'em accordin' to how you feel."

"Well, I reckon thet makes it plain enough," the older puncher grunted.

That was the first ominous portent of trouble coming on the range. Joe had said that Texas Rangers were drifting in. They had investigated the death of the sheriff, but by the time they arrived at the spot where the body had been found an overnight rain had obliterated all tracks of the man or men who had dry gulched the officer.

Jude went back to his riding, and the worst part of a bad Texas winter closed down in February. They fought it out, he and Cic, riding when they could and pushing the humped up cattle into draws, trying to hold them against the storm until it abated and then drive them back over into the nesters' holdings. It snowed four inches in late February, followed by another of those miserable driving northers that froze the snow to hard crusted ice, and the effects of it showed on the cattle. Quite a large number of the older, poorer cows froze to death in the draws during those final two nights when Jude and Cic sat humped over the smoking stove in the kitchen and tried to keep warm. They had to use saddle blankets over their tarps that last night to keep warm, and they slept in their clothes.

When the wind died down the following morning and the sun came out warm Jude rode across the white covered land appalled by what he saw in the choked draws. If it had been like that on the south range, down below the home ranch, then Harry Travers certainly wouldn't be putting any four thousand head up the trail next year —or the following. It turned Jude sick to

see the dead young calves.

But the weather had given all in that final storm and it began to turn warm. The grass began greening overnight and now it was mud. Jude rode with jerky beef and cold biscuits in his saddle bag and was out all day. He was still leaner than before and his hair was down over his ears in shaggy locks. He and Cic had gotten along swell during the lonely, hard months, though the scar-faced ex-Confederate soldier openly expressed his disgust at the two books Jude had brought from Kansas.

"I cain't make head nor tails of this Shakespeare," he had once exploded. "He don't even write *English!* An' take this dam' fool Hamlet. From what I can git outa it he musta got hit over the head with a whiskey bottle when he was a yearlin' an' got his thinkin' all twisted up. Biggest dam' fool I ever heard of. You go ahead an' read them books all you wants to, Jude. I'll pay a dime fer a good one where this young hero picks up the little girl's dropped purse in the railroad station an' her billionaire father gives him a job as a puncher in the office or ridin' herd on a bell-stack locomotive engine. He gits to be foreman of the company when the old man kicks the bucket, marries the now growed up girl, an' owns the whole outfit. *Thet's* the way I like 'em!"

THEY laughed and joked and played crude tricks on each other and then went out to work the day through, sometimes not getting back until dark. But the nester country to the north of them wasn't such good range and their cattle always appeared to have a penchant for the grass further south. Then it finally dawned on Jude that they were not drifting; they were being driven. The nesters were encroaching. It was deliberate.

Thus it came about that one morning Jude rose two hours earlier than usual. He left Cic sound asleep in his bunk, drank a cup of coffee, and picked up the food he had prepared the night before. He hadn't told Cic what he was going to do. The older man would have insisted on changing places with him. Jude closed the door softly behind him and went down to saddle up. Daylight found him eight miles west of the line cabin. He rode on, topped a ridge, and then he saw them. Three nesters working forty or fifty head of their stuff over onto what had been the old Hensen range. Jude put spurs to his mount and loped forward to the west, the newly risen sun hitting his back.

The three had seen him and then pulled up, as though uncertain. Jude pulled up too, three hundred yards away, his horse blocking them.

"Put 'em back!" he yelled. "Don't let 'em cross."

"This is nester land now, cow punch. They'll cross," came back an answering call.

Jude bent in the saddle and brought up his rifle. It was a .44-40 repeater, Model of 1866. He swung his horse around so that its left side faced the oncoming cows. Coolly he fired. A cow dropped. He dropped two more. A yell went up and a shot banged over his head. He slapped steel to the horse and buck jumped it into an arroyo and then swung down, crawling back to the top of the ridge while he thumbed more shells from his belt into the magazine. But the three riders had disappeared into the brush toward the northern line of where Duck Creek flowed in the distance.

Jude shoved the gun back into its sheath and mounted. He drove the cows back, watched them amble into the brush, and rode on along the line. When he got back that afternoon and told Cic what had occurred the older man was furious. It was the nearest to anger toward Jude that Cic had ever displayed.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded harshly. "You mighta got yourself killed. I'd have gone with you."

"You've got your end of the line to ride, the other direction, Cic," Jude said quietly. "This west end is mine and I'll ride it. I —"

A shadow had darkened the doorway. The man who stood there was about thirty-five years of age. He wore a brown hat, checkered shirt, dark wool pants, and boots that came to the knee, big "ears" flopping at the tops. Jude gave these a cursory glance. It wasn't on either the clothes or the guns the man wore. It was on the keen face and the badge on his shirt. The badge was a pentacle and had the words *Texas Ranger* stamped into it.

"Come in," he invited.

The man came in. He took off his hat,

glancing around the kitchen. "Howdy, boys," he greeted in a soft voice in keeping with his appearance. "I'm Durton. Texas Rangers. Which one of you men were riding the east end of the line from this camp this morning?"

"Him," Cic said belligerently. "Why?"

The Ranger looked at Jude. "You shot some Lazy S cows. Three of them," he said.

Jude nodded. "Three men driving them across over onto our range. I warned them not to. They said it was nester range now. I dropped three head and then ducked when one of them let drive at me with a rifle."

"Hmm. They didn't say anything about thet part of it. But they claim they've bought this range an' are entitled to graze it."

"I've been riding that line nearly every day since last fall," Jude told him quietly. "There were no surveyors on it before I came and there weren't any during the winter. They've supposedly surveyed and bought further west and south of here, toward Cap Rock, where the Cross Eight has set in, but not down here. This is the old Hensen north boundary."

"I saw your trail cut out of the grass during the winter," the Ranger admitted. "And I talked to Hensen before I came up. No surveyors, eh?"

"None," snapped Cic, still belligerent. "Seems to me you put in a purty quick appearance here, Mister, after Jude drove them cows off our range this mornin'. You in with these damned nesters?"

"The Rangers," came the quiet, hard reply, "ain't in with anybody. But there's rumors you've got a range war brewing between Travers and the small cowmen and, mister, that range war just ain't going to take place. That's why we're down here."

"And just how did you git holt of all these 'rumors' you're talkin' about?"

"We had word from the acting sheriff here,' the other explained patiently. "Hepburn. He sent in word to headquarters there was trouble brewing and some of us were sent up." He looked at Jude. "All right, son, there'll be no action taken because of this ruckus this mornin' because the legality of these small cowmen's claims are in doubt. I reckon I'd have done the same thing in your boots if I was back punchin', like I used to do. But just be a little more careful, boys, until this thing is cleared up."

Cic thawed a little and invited him to stay for supper. They had beans with big chunks of fat pork cooked in them, boiled potatoes, canned corn, and some cooked dried fruit, topped off by the inevitable cups of black coffee.

The Ranger rose with a sigh of contentment, pushing back his chair. He rolled a cigarette.

"That was a good meal, boys. Travers seems to feed his hands well." He struck a match on the still warm stove, lit the rolled cigarette, and reached for his hat. "Well, I'll be going. Thanks for the supper."

He rode out, swung aboard his horse, and disappeared into the night along the trail Jude had ridden westward almost every day for months.

Two days later Jude found his body.

CHAPTER XXVII

HE saw the saddled horse first, about 9 o'clock that sunny morning. It was wandering with reins dragging. He rode over and grabbed up the dangling reins, noting the blood stains on the saddle. They were fresh and so were the tracks of the animal. Durton lay less than three hundred yards away, near the lip of a gully.

Jude swung down and looked at the dead man. The Ranger had half rolled over on his side. He hadn't been killed quite instantly. Smoke rose from a fire down below and Jude went down the slippery bank.

It was a branding fire. Of that there could be no doubt. Cow and calf tracks led up over the bank and Jude went for his horse. He mounted and began following them. They led north, straight across the boundary into nester country, as he had known. Jude looked back at the spot where the horse now stood with reins dangling and turned his face to the north. He followed the tracks.

He crossed over and spurred along the trail, for Durton hadn't been dead more than an hour. The dun horse beneath him stretched out a bit further under the rowels while Jude kept a sharp lookout for signs of movements on the skyline. He was in the enemy's domain now.

Presently he pulled up, lipped a ridge cautiously, and saw his quarry. The rustler

was a quarter of a mile ahead, driving a cow and calf ahead of him and urging them to greateer speed.

Jude swung to the east, ducked back of a ridge and ran down close to Duck Creek's westward curve, and spurred hard. The soft sand took up the muffled beat of his horse's hoofs. He circled, cut in back of another promontory and swung down with his .44-40 in hand. The rustler rounded the promontory, throwing frightened glances back of him, and then pulled up sharp, fear and amazement on his face.

It was Grady.

"Get 'em up!" snapped Jude. "Up, Grady, or I'll blow you apart. I mean it!"

Grady saw the levelled barrel of the repeater and slowly obeyed, panic in his face. It wasn't a very pretty face. Small sores covered it now. Jude thought of the harridan with her arm around Grady that night in Abilene and stifled a shudder.

"Howdy, Jude," he said in a voice that was half whine. "What you doin' over here in nester country?"

"You know damn well what I'm doing. Drop that gunbelt with your right hand, Grady, and don't make any false moves. Drop it!"

Grady obeyed. Jude's eyes had gone to the cow and calf. It was one of Hensen's H Bar cows but the calf bore a newly burned Eight Cross on its hip, and there was a blue colored cinch ring hooked over the steel horn of Grady's saddle. He'd used the heated cinch ring, holding it between two sticks, to brand the calf until the Ranger had surprised him. The cow either would have been shot or possibly driven further north to have her brand blotted. Jude rode closer.

"Aw, hell, Jude, Travers has got plenty of cows, he won't miss a calf now an' then," Grady protested.

"He's missing plenty of them, but that's not what counts. I found the man you shot, Grady. Now round up that cow and calf and get 'em started south. You're not packing a saddle gun, and if you try to make a break for it I'll drop you out of the saddle. Get going!"

They got going, driving the rustled cow and calf before them, with Jude looking back over his shoulder. He had the evidence that would help to strengthen Travers' case against the nesters, and he didn't want a fight on his hands. They crossed back over the boundary and came to where the dead man lay. And about that time Cic came loping up.

"Just a hunch I had," he said quietly. "Just a hunch, Jude. Figgered you might get a shot in the back. Hello, Grady. So you're in with the nester pool now, eh?"

Grady maintained a sullen silence while Jude explained what had happened.

"Now," Cic grunted angrily, "I know who rattled thet slicker thet night up on Gramma Crick in Kansas an' shot Tolson in the dark. The Pool had some of their men waiting for whatever we lost in the stampede."

Grady said hoarsely, "Cic, I swear I didn't stampede that herd that night. I swear it! I was clean over on the other side of the herd an' I think I kin prove it. I was tryin' to turn 'em. One of the other boys was with me close by, an' if he ain't drifted he'll tell you the same. I didn't rattle that slicker. It was somebody else. I was doin' my best to help out, like as how any good puncher should. I was all for the T4 until Nute fired me in Abilene. Then I come back here all mad at him an' threw in with the nesters."

Something in his frantic words held a ring of truth for Jude. He didn't think that Grady was lying this time. He said, "That'll all come out later, I reckon. Right now we got a dead man on our hands, plus a rustled cow and a branded calf wearing the Eight Cross iron. What do we do now, Cic?"

Cic's eyes glinted as he rubbed the caved in outline of his scarred jaw. "Go in with 'em," he said. "We can make Alden by dark if we push hard enough. I want Blackie an' every dam' Texas Ranger in these parts to see this. Maybe it'll show 'em who's doin' the rustlin an' who's in the right. Let's get Durton's body lashed on his hoss, boys, an' get movin'. The line camp'll wait."

They lashed the dead man face down across his saddle and started driving the cow and calf southward ahead of them. But progress was slow and presently Jude said to Cic, "One of us oughta ride ahead and get Blackie. What do you think, Cic?"

"Good idea. You're lighter'n me, not to speak of bein' a hell of a lot younger. My bones don't take the jolts so good anymore. I'll keep pushin' this cow an' calf directly across country, makin' a bee line

for Alden an' takin' care of Grady, the dam' brand burnin' nester!" which in Cic's way of thinking was a lower epithet than calling him a son of a gun. "You burn the breeze on in an' come back with some help. They'll hang Grady for killin' thet Ranger."

"I still didn't stampede that herd," Grady protested, and scratched at one of the sores on his face.

JUDE gave Cic a wave of the hand and turned in the saddle, heading southward. His weight was slightly less than one hundred and fifty pounds and the cow pony beneath him had been loafing for two days. He sent it forward at a long lope that would eat up the miles, loping and jogging it by turns, and now and then stopping to let it blow.

It was drenched with sweat when he finally swung down before Bronson's stable and ordered it rubbed down, watered a bit, led around in a circle for a while to cool off, and then fed. It had been a terrible run; he had got all out of the cow pony that it had to offer.

He walked southward toward the line of saloons, came in between two of them, and turned west toward where the sheriff's office had been. The sign above the clapboard building was gone. A man came along the street and recognized him; it was one of the original Hensen punchers, now on the T4 payroll.

"Yu're thet line rider from over on Duck Creek, ain't yu?" he asked.

Jude nodded. The newly finished courthouse gleamed red in the sun and so did the new stone jail.

"Seen the sheriff around?" Jude asked.

"Blackie? Sure. Just come from the courthouse. Thet's his office on this corner. Things kinda changed around here since you left, boy. We're growin' up."

"Thanks," Jude said brusquely, and left him. He went across into a big hallway running north and south through the building, with doors leading off on each side. One said *County Treasurer* in bold letters painted on its grey color. Another said *County Attorney. County Clerk. County Judge.*

One Jude hadn't noticed said *County Sheriff.*

No doubt about it. Alden was coming up. The country was getting settled—with nesters—and was growing up. Jude pushed into the sheriff's office.

He saw three men. One of them was Blackie. The two others were Texas Rangers. Blackie dropped his feet from his desk, a look of pleasant surprise coming over his handsome face.

"Well, look who's here," he greeted, getting up and extending a hand. "Hello, Jude, boy, I'm glad to see you. Thought it would be another couple of weeks before Harry relieved his winter line riders. You're early."

Jude shook hands with him, unaware of his wild appearance. He was all cow country now. All traces of the Kansas farmer had disappeared. He wore boots and chaps and a pistol and he looked the part of which he was: a wild line rider coming in from a winter in a line camp.

Blackie introduced him to the Rangers. Jude heard names he didn't remember. They were quiet and efficient looking. One of them had a hard face. Probably an ex-outlaw. The Texas Rangers were taking a lot of outlaws into service now. They were hard, deadly men; they knew who was riding the dim trails where; and this knowledge, plus their loyalty to the badge they wore, made them invaluable. They were doing a good job helping to clean up the bad element in Texas.

"Travers didn't relieve Cic and me," Jude said.

The sun shone through the big window. The black door of a big vault was slightly open. Boots clumped along the ten foot wide corridor and turned in at the Treasurer's office. Somebody paying their taxes.

"Trouble?" asked one of the Rangers; the younger one.

"Trouble," Jude said.

"We got a man up that way. Durton. You seen him?"

"Cic's bringing him in," Jude answered. "Seems as though he caught one of the nesters branding a calf and got shot." He looked at Blackie. "It's Grady. I caught him red-handed. Cic's bringing *him* in too. I came on ahead to get you."

Blackie was eyeing him. "Grady? Good God! What's he doing back in this country after Nute fired him in Abilene?"

"It kind of looks like he's rustling cattle."

"A rebranded calf, you say? What brand?"

"Eight Cross on the calf. H Bar on the cow. I got the drop on him and back

tracked to where he had killed Durton. Cic came up and started bring them in—Durton's body, the two critters, and Grady. Grady swears it wasn't him that stampeded the herd that night up on Gramma Creek, in Kansas. I believe what he said."

THE two Texas Rangers looked at each other. "I reckon we better get rolling," the hard faced one said. "Durton, you say? So they got him? He was a good officer."

Then Travers came in the doorway and stopped to look at Jude. More crisp explanations were necessary. Blackie was buckling on his guns and picking up a pair of handcuffs.

"I reckon I'll go with you, boys," Travers said. "This concerns me."

"What do you Rangers think now?" the cattleman asked, brusquely.

"We don't think," came the reply from the hard-faced man. "We just act."

The sun splayed down. A rig rattled along the north side of the square, the two women occupants discreetly turning their faces away from the line of saloons. From down in the flats north of town came the shrill barking of prairie dogs, sitting on the edges of the high mounded holes. Jude once had had a pet prairie dog. They didn't tame very easily.

He said, "My horse is tired and I'm hungry. You should meet Cic not more than seven or eight miles out, in a bee line between here and the Hensen ranch. You need me to go with you?"

"No," Blackie replied. "We'll find them. You wait in town and get some rest and we'll be in before sundown."

Jude watched them go, the two Rangers to mount their horses, Travers to get his from in back of Sol's store, Blackie to pick up one from Bronson's livery. Jude went across the square to a restaurant, two doors down from Sol's store, the saloon in between them. He didn't feel like a drink. He ate and then got a haircut and lounged around town, his eyes continually going to the mesquite covered flats to the north. He was waiting for the reappearance of the four men and what Cic was bringing.

He wanted to go see Edwina, but some instinct kept him from doing so. He carefully avoided that section of the street where her shop was located.

Five men came in at about an hour before sundown. The two lawmen, the sheriff, Travers, and Grady. Grady wore a pair of handcuffs now. He was a badly frightened puncher. Jude was at the Bronson livery corral when they drove in the cow and calf, each wearing different brands. The cow was angry and the calf was hungry. It went for its mother and began sucking, the newly burned brand on its hip showing up plainly. Jude saw the grim look on Blackie's face as he and the two Rangers took the frightened Grady over to the new jail, also built of red sandstone, and disappeared inside. They came out again, swinging shut the iron door. Travers hadn't accompanied them. He had put away his horse in the livery, exchanged it for a borrowed fresh one to make the return ride to the ranch, and now he rode to where Jude and Cic stood alone on the boardwalk. They had met there. Cic also hadn't accompanied the three officers to the jail.

"Here comes the boss," the older man said.

"How's he take it?" Jude asked.

"He made the most of it. He lit into them Rangers like you never saw before. Told 'em off plenty about nester rustlin'. They didn't say much. I see 'em comin' back from the jail with Durton still strapped over the saddle. I reckon they'll bury him here."

"I guess," Jude answered, and then Travers rode up.

Little knots of men were clustered on corners. Nester women came out of the store and stood looking. A man wearing a bartender's apron stood on the boardwalk on the north side of the square, staring.

Travers reined up. He looked down at the two T4 men. "I'll send a couple more of the boys up to the camp to take over," he said. "You two can come on back to the ranch. Want to stay in town tonight and get the winter fuzz outa your hair?"

"Sounds good," Jude replied.

"This is a big town fer a pilgrim from a winter line camp but I'll try to make out," Cic answered.

" All right. Stay in and kick up your heels. But we've got work to do and visitors coming to the ranch. Somebody'll have to meet 'em. See you boys at the ranch."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THEY went over to the hotel and got rooms. Joe was due at the line camp

in a day or so with his wagon and would bring back their tarps and other stuff to the ranch. Cic and Jude went out for a couple of drinks before eating. Somebody else's cooking would taste wonderful after eating their own for several months. The bar next to Sol's big store was pretty well filled with men, bellied up along the forty foot length against the west wall.

"Nesters," grunted Cic in an aside and spat.

Men looked at them and either stared or silently turned away. Others looked coldly and then resumed conversation, ignoring them. Not much doubt about it: Alden was becoming a nester town. They were the only two regular punchers in the place, though most of the other patrons wore boots and spurs and Stetsons.

One of them Jude recognized. He was a man with a short cut yellow beard, the hair trimmed spade-like across the bottom of his chin. The man was big, hard-eyed, belligerent looking.

"What'll it be, boys?" the bartender asked.

"Rye," Cic said. "I got to cut the taste outa my mouth."

"It looks like," a voice said distinctly and sneeringly, "that a small cowman caint come in an' have a drink anymore without the place bein' smelled up with mesquite an' horse sweat an' horse dung. Somebody orta open the window an' let out the smell."

Cic turned slowly, eyeing the speaker. It was the man with the yellow spade-shaped beard. Jude recognized a second with him too. He was pretty sure the third made up the trio who had driven the cows across the old Hensen north boundary that other morning.

It got a dead quiet in the room. The checker games stopped and so did the poker sessions. The drinkers froze for just a moment and then, like quiet shadows, drifted away. The bar was bare except for a line of glasses containing unfinished drinks and five men. Jude and Cic at one end and the three nesters at the other. The bartender brought the drinks. His hands were trembling as he placed bottle and glasses on the bar.

Jude reached into a shirt pocket, where he happened to have some change. He used his left hand. The right lay close to the butt of his six shooter. Cic picked up the bottle and poured and *his* hands weren't trembling. He poured for them both and then looked at Jude, grinning with saturnine humor.

"It's plumb awful what a winter in a line camp will do for a feller," he said. "He gits outa touch with civilization. He fergits things. Now you take me: I ain't heard hooman voices in so long I've sorta forgot what they sound like. I thought fer a minute I heard somebody speak, but I recognize it now. It was one of the town jackasses out in the alley, a-brayin' an' a-hee-hawin'. It wasn't a hooman at all." He drank with a backward flick of his head and put the empty glass down, pouring another after he wiped his lips with his sleeve. "Sure cuts the bad taste an' sound outa a man," he remarked.

"Was you the fellers brought in thet ranger this mawnin'?" Yellow Beard asked sarcastically.

Cic looked at the bartender. "It's thet jackass again," he complained. "A-brayin' an' a-hee-hawin'. Cain't you go out in the alley an' chase him away, Johnny? I been up in a line camp so long I ain't what I used to be. My nerves is plumb tender an' my hearin' is plumb sensitive. Tell you what, Johnny," to the rigid, frozen faced barkeep. "I'll loan you my rope. You double it an' go out an' bust him on the rump an' chase him up back of Sol's store. Sol's a purty kind hearted feller. He's even kind to nesters. You tell him I said give this burro a bale of hay an' I'll pay fer it. I'll bet he's been so hongry fer a real good meal of hay thet he's been forced to eat T4 *beef* to keep alive."

There could have been no more direct insult and every man in the room knew it. A man cleared his throat uneasily and Jude's cold eyes flicked to him, flicked back to Yellow Beard's sneering face. The teeth, as yellow as the beard, showed through the hair about his lips in a brittle grin.

He switched his attention to Jude. Perhaps he was stalling. Perhaps he was waiting, taking his time; baiting him because there were three of them to the two T4 punchers.

"How's the cow shootin' business these days?" Yellow Beard inquired blandly.

"Not very good," Jude answered quietly. "I had plenty of chances but I hate to shoot our own stuff.'

"Was yuh very upset over them three pore critters yuh downed?"

"I was more upset over that try you made at me with a rifle. You ought to spend some of that beef money buying some cartridges and practicing."

"I got plenty of cartridges."

"Then," jeered Cic, "why don't you use 'em an' —"

It happened then. Jude had caught the downward jerk of the yellow bearded man's shoulder. Two six shooters came up over the bar almost simultaneously. The nester's gun roared and Cic grabbed frantically at the bar as Jude's own gun smashed back in recoil against his palm. He drove a .44 slug straight into the beard, shot the second man, and killed the third as the nester fired wildly. Three bodies thudded to the floor and Jude grabbed out with his left arm, Cic's weight sinking into it. Cic was grabbing at the bar with his right hand; fumblingly.

"Don't move!" Jude snarled, his gun covering the others. "I'll kill the first man who makes a move."

HE STOOD flaming faced, the smoking six shooter in his right hand, He pushed Cic over to rest his weight against the bar and Cic fumbled for the bottle. Red was beginning to stain the left shoulder of his shirt.

"What I need is a drink," he mumbled. "Johnny, ain't you got no manners?" His gun was still in its sheath. The nester with the beard had shot without warning.

The heavy sounds of the six shooters—four shots—had blasted out through the open doors and into the town. Jude heard yells and running feet. Men began to pour in. The first three in were Blackie and the two Texas Rangers.

Jude was still supporting Cic's sagging figure. Cic was still mumbling and trying to hold onto the edge of the bar.

Three dead men lay on the floor, one of them still twitching. Red smeared into the sawdust.

"Put that gun down!" Blackie roared at Jude.

"I'll put it down when those nesters get their hands in sight."

"I said put it down!"

"Keep out of line of fire, Blackie," Jude said tonelessly. "They got Cic without warning. His gun is still in the sheath. Theirs are on the floor."

"Here, son," the older Ranger with the hard face interrupted. "Let me have him."

He hauled Cic over to a table and sat him down in a chair. Cic fell forward across the green top, face resting in his crossed elbows, as though asleep.

Slowly Jude sheathed the six shooter. Blackie was staring at him. He asked, "What happened?"

Jude jerked his head toward the barkeep. His flaming young eyes were still on the frozen men at the tables.

"Ask him. Tell him, Johnny. Tell him exactly what happened."

The barkeep told them. "Porter," he finished up, nodding toward the yellow bearded man on the floor, "jerked his gun first and shot Cic an' was linin' at Jude when Jude got 'im. The other two drawed —their guns are clear of the sheaths an' on the floor—but Jude killed the three of 'em with three shots. He had that gun out so fast I hardly seen it. Whew! I'm sure glad you fellers come in."

Blackie looked at Jude, who still stood by the bar. He saw a young face that was pale but containing no fear. Six men now. Six men gone out of the nester pool. And those three guns on the floor, Cic's gun still in its sheath—

Blackie looked at the rangers and Jude saw uncertainty in his eyes. Blackie was thinking in this moment that Jude had to go. Give this quiet-eyed young ex-farmer time and he'd wipe out the pool.

The younger of the rangers had stepped forward, looking down at the three dead men. He bent and picked up Porter's gun, examining it.

"One shot fired," he said. "Thet was the one thet got that other puncher whose gun is still in the sheath. The others didn't shoot?" he asked the barkeep.

"They didn't have time," Johnny answered. "Cornell was drawing when Jude got him. Broden's gun was up over the bar when he got it square in the face."

"Well, Blackie?" queried the hard faced Ranger.

"What do you think?" Blackie returned. "Looks like I'll have to arrest Jude."

"Arrest, hell! It was self defense—and ain't you kind of forgettin' that he brought in the man who killed Durton? This young puncher got the rustler who shot Durton when he surprised him rustlin' a cow and calf."

"All right." Blackie looked at Jude. "You're in the clear, Jude. But you're doing all right for yourself. You've got six

notches on your gun. That's a hell of a lot of men for a puncher not turned twenty yet. But as acting sheriff I warn you, Jude: if this keeps up, I'll have to bring you in one of these days."

"We better get a doctor for Cic," was the quiet reply. "He's bleeding badly."

"I'll get one," one of the rangers said. And to Jude: "Son, we can use a man like you before you throw a gun at the wrong time an' end up as a desperado. It'll happen sooner or later if you keep this up. No wild shooting cow puncher can last. He either goes to boothill or he hangs. It's better to be on the side of the law than on the other side. I'll talk to you again one day soon."

It was the hard faced older man. And Jude thought he knew. This man had been an outlaw before he had come over to become a lawman.

"Thanks," Jude said, and went to Cic.

Somebody pushed through the crowd jammed around the front door. Two women. They were Edwina and Nell Travers.

"Oh, Jude, I'm sorry," Edwina cried out.

"It's all right,' he answered.

NELL had gone to Cic, still down over the table, his face buried in his arms. He was unconscious from the shock of the big bullet. She displayed surprising strength and initiative. She got him in her arms, pulled him from the chair, and stretched him out on the floor, unbuttoning his blood soaked shirt. "Get me some clean bar towels,' she called out.

She was still working over him when the doctor arrived. A borrowed knife had cut away the shirt. Cic lay with his chest bared, red trying to ooze through the pads she had put on.

The doctor—his name was Vogel—got busy. He strapped Cic's chest tight to stop the flow of blood and rose.

"One of you men go get a light wagon and we'll take him down to my house," he commanded. "I'll have to probe for the bullet and remove it. It missed the lung. Lodged above it." He went over to the bar and poured himself a drink into one of the glasses. He turned and surveyed the crowd, a disillusioned looking man of about forty-five. "Gun fighters," he said. "Wild, gun throwing cow punchers who pack six shooters and kill at the slightest provocation. I served four years as a surgeon in the Confederate Armies. I patched them up, I amputated, I stood over them and watched them die, some of them boys not more than fifteen, their guts blown out by rifle and pistol balls. Three hundred and fifty thousand of them from the south. Two hundred and fifty thousand more from the north. And for what? For the survivors to come out here, guns still on their hips, rifles in their hands, and continue the slaughter. I wish to God I had become either an athiest or a minister—anything but a doctor. Man's inhumanity to man." He poured himself another drink. On the floor Cic lay still, the bandages glaringly out of place in the saloon, faint groans coming from deep within his tortured chest.

Jude found himself out into the clean air of the street. He found the two women walking alongside him. None of them spoke. Sol stood in the doorway of his store and looked and said nothing. He shook his head sadly after they had passed and went back inside. Riders clattered up the street and went to the saloon where the crowd still were gathered. The red stones of the new courthouse shone, bright and new, not yet beaten to a color change by the elements. The jail, where Grady was confined in a cell, looked grim with its barred windows, Nell broke the silence immediately.

"I came in to get fitted for some new dresses for the house warming," she said to Jude. "We're making the final ones tonight. Edwina and I have become good friends since you left last fall."

"I'm glad," Jude said. And to Edwina: "Are you coming out for the celebration?"

Nell laughed. "Of course she is, silly! So is Sol and everybody else in town. Well, a lot of them."

"When is it to be?"

"Saturday night—two days from now. The guests from the East will be in on the stage Saturday morning. Pa's already had the barbecue pits dug and is going to butcher a steer. The house is all finished."

They stopped in front of Edwina's place and the two women went in. Jude walked on toward the hotel. He wasn't hungry anymore. All he wanted to do was to go up to his room and lie down. He saw a man across the street, at the hitch rack in front of the dancehall; a pot bellied man who wore two guns.

Red Tolliver.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE hotel was a box-shaped clapboard affair two stories high, without a false front. Edwina's rooms were in the right hand corner, Blackie's across the hall. Further back Jude lay in another. The two Texas Rangers shared one on the left rear corner. Four rooms; and in them events were shaping the lives of their occupants, each seemingly to push out in different directions, in hopes and dreams and plans and ambitions, yet each strangely tied in with the others.

Darkness had come down. The town was quiet except for the barking of a dog playing a game of bluff with distant coyotes yapping on the prairie. Sol's big store was locked, dark, silent. Only the saloons were lit. They were doing a desultory business. Men in them talked quietly, discussing the gun fight that had taken place a few hours earlier.

Nell was sharing the room with Edwina. They had finished with the fittings. Nell would return to the ranch the following morning. She sat before Edwina's bureau mirror, combing her lovely russet locks, dressed only in a petticoat. Her bare arms and shoulders shone soft and rounded in the light of the lamp beside her, her young breasts half bared. She turned on the stool.

"You know something, Edwina?" she called.

Edwina came in from the other room, her golden head shining in the light. She too had removed her dress. They were getting ready to retire. Nell's riding skirt and man's shirt hung in a closet, her boots on the floor beside the bed. She was in her stocking feet.

"That's a vague question, Nell?" she smiled.

"I think Blackie's really in love with you."

"Do you, dear?"

"I really do," Nell declared. "He pays me compliments in that gallant way of his. Every time he meets me it's always the same. He tells me how beautiful I am and how lucky some man will be when he marries me. But there's something in his eyes I don't like."

"Perhaps it's what you'd call a shallow love, Nell. Like the bitter one I went through."

"Perhaps." There were few secrets between them now. At least on the surface. The ex-singer had never tried to hide the fact that she had been in love with Blackie. It hardly would have been worth the attempt in view of the fact that she had come with on the stage from Abilene. "But there's something in the way he looks at me that I don't like," Nell finished.

"You mean he might want to make love to you?" Edwina smiled.

"No, dear. He's too . . . well, too calculating. I almost feel I've got dollar signs all over me when Backie is looking me over and paying such nice compliments. I don't think it's real love. You know, Edwina, I envy you."

Edwina was on the edge of the bed, removing her stockings. "Why?" she asked.

"You won't get mad if I tell you?"

"Of course not."

"It's because you've known what *real* love is. I've often wondered what it would be like to be in a man's arms in the darkness—somebody you really cared for. I wouldn't care if he didn't have any money or was handsome or anything else, just as long as I loved him. You've been through that and I envy you. I guess I'm pretty ignorant in a lot of ways," she finished, laughing. "But I'll bet I'd love him to death."

"It is a wonderful thing, Nell," the older woman replied. "You meet somebody like I met Blackie. There's something about him that makes you forget everything except that you want to be with him every minute. You feel his arms around you and let him kiss you and the world becomes a secondary place where time means nothing. It's just the present moment that counts."

"Gee, I'd like that! You know something: I'd give anything if Jude would try to make love to me." She twisted around on the stool to face Edwina. Her eyes were alight. "First, I'd flirt with him a little. Then I'd push him off and pretend to be indignant when he tried to kiss me. Then I'd go over against him so he could smell the perfume in my hair. After that . . . well, I just don't know," she giggled.

Edwina smiled at the younger woman. "After that, Nell, would come the possible disillusionment that I suffered. You love a man, you break all the rules that your common sense says you shouldn't break, and then one day you wake up to the realization that he doesn't love you as you wanted to be loved. Don't ever make the mistake that I made, dear. The knife goes too deep

. . . and when it's twisted it hurts. It hurts all the harder when you realize that someone you've placed your trust in isn't what you thought and believed."

"I'll bet Jude would never be that way."

"No," and Edwina's voice was barely audible, "I don't think Jude would. Jude's got character." She was remembering the night last fall when he had intruded right as Blackie slapped her. She was remembering the flame in his eyes at Blackie—hidden, Jude thought—but not from her. The kind of flame that would have lashed out into gunfire had not Blackie's smooth laughter averted it. Nor would she ever forget the own hidden, inner flame that had possessed her when she had taken his face between her hands and kissed him and said, "Come to me, Jude." Something she hadn't been able to control had caused her to do it. And she might as well face the fact: she was in love with Jude. Her heart and her soul and her body was crying out for him, she loved him that much.

She, Edwina Cochran, who had come in on the stage with Blackie and was recognized as his "woman."

Edwina lay with the covers over her, on her back, looking up into the darkness. The hotel was quiet.

"I can't really talk, Nell. I told you that love could be shallow. Blackie's was."

"Not anymore. He loves you. I know," Nell insisted.

"He loves me because I'm not his girl anymore. As long as I was he took me for granted. When I finally saw through him and broke away, and he realized he had lost me, he came back. Men always do when they lose a woman."

Nell snuggled down against a pillow, burying her lovely young face in its softness. "Well, he still loves you," she said with conviction. "No matter how come or why. And I still envy you. I'm so terribly ignorant about some things, Nell," she finished.

She went to sleep, the pillow Jude's shoulder against her cheek, and Edwina lay staring into the darkness.

A few rooms further back on the same floor Jude had undressed. He was sleepless. He had, instinctively, wanted to clean his gun, but had nothing with which to clean it. He had reloaded it instead. The three empty shells representing three dead men lay in his palm before he tossed them into a gobboon in a corner. He blew out the light and couldn't go to sleep for a long time. There was Edwina, she who aroused such emotions in him. And there was Nell Travers, she who prodded him to anger, yet caused the constriction to hit his stomach when she was near; young, fiery, hot tempered. . . .

He rolled over restlessly and tried to sleep.

In the corner room the older of the two rangers was pulling off his boots. The younger was writing out a report to headquarters in Austin.

"The kid was in the clear," boot dropping to the floor; he reached for the second, tugging. "Three of them and it must hev been fast. Thet boy's got the makings of a good officer or a desperado."

The younger man lifted his face from his reports and a faint grin twisted his mouth. "You oughta know. The only reason you didn't go back to Fort Smith with a U. S. Marshal's handcuffs on was because you broke some kind of record getting friends of yourn in the rangers to get you a badge."

The hard faced man grinned back, stretching out on the bed with his clothes still on. "Mebbe so, mebbe so," he agreed, and then grew serious. "And now we've got a lot of bother on our hands because of thet rustler who shot Durton. He oughta be hung quick."

"He will be," grunted the other.

He went back to his writing and the other rolled over on his back, hands locked behind his head.

IN Blackie's room, across from where the two girls slept, Blackie too was on the bed, stretched out and thinking in the darkness. His first emotions had been fear and then rage at the stupid Grady for the blundering job the ex-T4 puncher had done. Killing the ranger wasn't so bad. Grady would have been arrested and most likely hung anyhow. What enraged Blackie was the fact that the slow-witted puncher had been rustling within plain sight of the boundary and had done such a thing in broad daylight. People took it for granted that the Cross Eight was a nester pool ranch. But these Texas Rangers were sharp characters. They had a way of asking questions and getting information.

And if they ever found out that a burned brand on a stolen calf belonged to the acting sheriff himself. . . .

The door open cautiously without sound and a man slipped into the room.

"That you, Red?" Blackie whispered.

"Yup. I slipped up the back way. Had to see you."

He felt his way forward and sat down. The side of the bed creaked under his more than two hundred pounds.

"What's up?" grunted the sheriff.

"The boys. They're boilin' mad over thet shoot out this afternoon. They're sore at yu. They're sayin' we've lost three more good men outa the pool because yu didn't keep yore promise to bring thet little gun throwin' side winder in with us like you said."

"There's no doubt about it—I underestimated Jude. He was such a green farmer kid and so grateful for me getting him on with the outfit, showing him how to pick his guns, and taking him around Abilene—I even got him a woman nearly as pretty as Edwina to stay with that night we were there. An average kid would have jumped at the chance to come in with us and do as I say. But Jude's not an average puncher."

"You damn well right he ain't!" grunted Red Tolliver's voice from four feet away. "He's a lightning on wheels killer and nuthin' else." He changed the subject. "Yu reckon Grady's goin' to spill his guts when them rangers start questionin' him over in yore office in the mawnin'?"

"I don't think so. When I fed him his supper I had a talk with him. He figures I'll find a way to let him escape."

"Well, yu got the key to the jail."

"So have the rangers. They've got a key that'll fit my office door and the jail keys are on my desk."

Tolliver rose. He was in his sock feet, boots in hand. "Well, I'd better git back to the boys an' tell 'em. Yu oughta be able to figger out somethin' about Grady so's them rangers won't git suspicious about him escapin'."

"I'll try to figure out something, Red."

"And this Jude puncher too?"

"I'll stop Jude at the first opportunity."

"Good. Because if yu don't, I'm goin' to."

Blackie laughed gently, though there was a hard undertone in the sound. "It's your funeral, Red."

Tolliver grunted and went out soundlessly. The door closed behind him. Blackie lay there on the bed, his thoughts strangely not upon the problems at hand. They would come later. His thoughts were upon the two women sleeping just across the hallway. One of them had been his girl and he was determined that she would be again. The other he wanted as his wife. Someday she'd be mistress of that big new twelve room house he was going to visit Saturday night, and Blackie wanted that, too.

The night wore on and the town gradually became quiet, except for the dog still playing dark bluff with the coyotes. The men came up the steps, stumbling drunkenly to their room. One by one the lights of the saloons winked out back of padlocked doors. Bronson closed his livery and went home to his wife.

Alden slept with no movement except for one man.

Red Tolliver had slipped into the livery and cut the throat of the rustled calf and skinned away the newly burned brand put on with a heated cinch ring.

CHAPTER XXX

JUDE was dressed and washing his face in a big white bowl on the bureau the next morning when Blackie came in.

"Morning, Jude."

"Morning."

"How do you feel?"

Jude reached for the towel, drying his face and damp hair. The "smell" that the barber had put on the day before was still evident.

"I didn't sleep very well, Blackie. Kind of tossed around a bit."

Blackie smiled and seated himself on the edge of the rumpled bed. The covers were twisted and slantwise with a corner of a quilt down on the floor. He rolled a morning smoke. Jude bent to the mirror, parting his fine hair.

"I don't blame you. That was some fracas. But I felt the same way first time I ever shot it out with a man. You come on down and have breakfast with me and you'll feel a lot better."

"All right. I've got to get back to the ranch this morning. But you never have said just how many men you have downed,

Blackie, and I never asked, though I was always a bit curious." He picked up his hat and then swung the heavy cartridge belt around his slim waist. It slid into place.

They went out.

"Four, Jude," the sheriff replied as they went down the hallway to the steps. "That is, not counting the war."

"I never heard you say anything about the war."

Blackie grinned. "That isn't all, boy, you won't either. It's been over only four years and Texas was on the losing side. You see, Jude, I was a Union spy, working back of the Confederate lines. Spying is not the most honored profession among the men who fought on both sides. But somebody had to do it and I did; and a few times when I was found out I had to protect myself from being blindfolded and shot. That's why I carried a long, razor sharp knife. I used it three times."

They were out in the street now, and Jude again was seeing another side of Blackie's character. He had said it so casually, this cutting of men's throats with a knife. Not many men in Texas cared to use such a weapon, preferring the six shooter or a rifle. Now and then some swaggering badman took a knife in one hand and a corner of his bandana in the other and invited somebody to take hold of the other corner and see who could hang on the longest, but this was mostly bluff. Texans were afraid of cold steel, as were most other people.

The two men went down to a cafe on the north west corner of the square, across from where the old sheriff's office, now deserted, had been. They ate breakfast and Blackie ordered another fixed up to take over to Grady. He carried it out into the street. The town was quiet, only one saloon being open to catch the trade of the men who liked their morning drink. Dr. Vogel came by, on his way to get one.

"Morning," he grunted.

"Morning, Doc," Blackie replied. "How's Cic this morning?"

"Demanding a drink of whiskey," snapped the other. "I was out of it—drank it all up last night and gave him the rest—and now I'm after a pint for him. It's not enough that I patch up their carcasses and remove bullets from their tough hides and get up in the middle of the night to fix broken noses and extract loose teeth knocked out in bar room fights. Almighty God, no! I've got to go pack liquor for them to guzzle in *my* bed. Slept on the couch last night. Didn't sleep worth a damn either!"

He went toward the saloon, scowling, and Blackie laughed. "He's a rough and tough customer himself; as tough as any of the men he patches up. But he's a pretty nice old boy at that. Well, Jude, come on over with me while I give Grady his breakfast. He won't mind and I want you to see the new jail anyhow. Sort of get you acquainted with it beforehand, in case you get into any more of these shooting scrapes."

"Are you keeping him here?" Jude asked as they crossed the street and entered the courthouse yard.

"All depends upon the rangers. They're going to bring him over to the office in a little while and get a written confession out of him, which means that you'd better stay around. It happened in my jurisdiction, but because the murder of one of him to bend the stiffened arms and make him out of here for trial, perhaps in Austin. You'd have to go up as a prosecution witness."

They went into the hallway and Blackie unlocked the door to his office. He came out with a large ring containing several big keys, one of about six inches in length fitting the main door. They headed toward the new jail with its grim looking bars in the windows and Blackie unlocked the heavy door of sheet steel with riveted cross braces. He swung it wide and they entered.

There were three cells and Grady was in the far one. There was no sound of movement and Blackie called out, "All right, Grady. Roll out of that bunk. I've got your breakfast."

He paused and stared; they both stared, for Grady wasn't going to need any breakfast.

He hung by his belt from the side of the cell, his boots dangling three inches above the concrete floor.

"Good God!" Blackie burst out and hurriedly set down the pail. He unlocked the door and swung it wide and they entered.

JUDE followed him in and looked at the hanging rustler. Grady wasn't a very pretty sight. His head tilted over at a sharp right angle. His tongue was pro-

truding with little bubbles of dried froth around the corners of his mouth. The mouth was open, baring his buck teeth, and Grady seemed to be grinning at the wall, except for the protruding tongue. His face had changed color and that made the sores on his coarse face stand out all the more. His hands hung lax at his sides.

"Get him around the legs, Jude, and lift him up," Blackie commanded, and stepped up into the blanketed bunk.

Jude took hold of the body, grasping it around the upper part of the legs. He lifted and Blackie leaned over and loosed the buckle of the belt enough to slip the improvised noose up over the dead brand blotter's head. The body came sagging down, but not bending too far. Rigor mortis had set in. Grady had been dead for several hours.

Jude laid him in the bunk and stretched him out on his back. Some instinct caused their men was involved they might take some kind of an effort to cross them over Grady's chest. A sleeve slid back and Jude saw that the skin around the wrists was chafed. Blackie's sharp eyes saw what was taking place. He looked at Jude.

"Seems to me he mighta changed his mind after looping that belt around his neck and tying the other end around to the top of the cell bars," he said. "I guess that when his wind got shut off he figured suicide wasn't such an easy out from a legal neck breaking after all. I'd say he grabbed hard at the bars and fought to get back on the bunk, but didn't have the strength."

"It looks that way," Jude agreed.

But he noticed that one of Grady's feet was a little longer than the other. The boot was part way slipped off, cocked in place at the ankle. And Jude knew those marks on Grady's wrists were rope marks. His hands had been tied behind him before he was hung.

And then some man who could be nothing short of a fiend had dropped down, locked his arms around Grady's boot tops, and pulled down hard until the rustler strangled.

One of the boots had slipped.

Blackie's voice said, "I don't know whether those two rangers will be mad or glad about Grady hanging himself to keep from making a confession and then being hung on a scaffold. But I guess Grady figured it was outs for him anyhow, and he couldn't stand the thought. So he took off his belt and looped it around his neck, tied the other end to a cell bar, and slid off the bunk. That took more nerve than I thought Grady had. I wouldn't mind getting hit quick and center with a lead ball, I've used a knife enough in defense of my life to be able to take one of them, if it came into my ribs real hard; but to slide off of a bunk and choke to death like he did—that's what I haven't got nerve enough to do."

"Not much more we can do here," Jude answered, leaving the cell. He was a little sick at his stomach. He wanted to get out into the clean air again. "So I think I'll go over to the livery and saddle my horse. He'll be stiff this morning after that run yesterday, but he'll soon get the kinks out. I've got to get back to the ranch."

Blackie was walking toward the front door with him. The cell had been left open, the breakfast pail left on the floor, forgotten; and that ominous belt with its noose pulled through a buckle still dangled from the high bar.

"You'll be riding out with Nell," Blackie said, not bothering to lock the big steel door with its riveted cross braces. "Look here, boy. You take good care of her for your pardner. Remember what I said when we went into the lobby of that hotel in Abilene?"

"You said, 'I want that,' though you didn't say how you wanted it. Legal or like Edwina. I remember."

BLACKIE laughed and clapped him on the back. "Jude, your memory is good. That's exactly what I said. I'm going to marry that girl. She's everything I've always wanted in a woman. All I need is a little time to bring her around to the idea that with Harry owning the biggest ranch in the country and her married to the sheriff—I'm going to run next election and I'm pretty sure of winning—her future will be secure."

They were walking toward the courthouse again. "What about Edwina?" Jude asked.

"I'm no longer interested," Blackie lied. "She's just a woman who was a little too easy. She understood that because, being a singer in a tough rail town dancehall, she's that kind of a woman. I made a mis-

take in bringing her out here. A moment of weakness. Now she follows me around and complains that I don't love her anymore. I might let her hang around if I was still punching cows. But I'm a lawman now and I've got a reputation to look out for. On top of that I'm crazy about Nell. She's high-spirited and independent. She's far above the average woman in education. So you take good care of her for me, pardner. And I still think you're crazy not to come in here and set in with me, Jude. I can do things for you."

They were at the courthouse now. Jude stopped. The two rangers were coming across from a cafe, toothpicks working between their lips. They had just finished breakfast.

"I can do things for myself, give me time, Blackie. I'll stick to punching cows."

Something like a sigh went out of the sheriff's breast. "All right, Jude. Every man has his own destiny to work out. But I've got to warn you, pardner. I'm a lawman with a job to do. And these shootings are going to stop. If it happens again, I'll have to come after you with a warrant for your arrest."

"Harrison had fired one shot at you before I jerked your gun and got in another lucky shot," was the steady answer. "Tabor and Jergens had Cic with his gunbelt off and making me drop mine. Those three yesterday pulled their guns first. I didn't want any of it to happen but it did. It'll be that way from now on. My gun is for my protection, nothing else. If I ever kill another man any other way, you can have my gun when you serve your warrant. If I don't, you'll have to take it off me."

"You'd throw a gun against me?"

"I wouldn't want to, Blackie."

"Jude, you wouldn't have a chance."

"I guess not. But I'll take it, if it has to happen that way. Well, I guess I'll be going. I'll take good care of Miss Travers. See you at the celebration Saturday night."

He went north toward Bronson's livery, nodding to the two strolling Texas Rangers. He was unaware that Blackie was staring after him; and Jude felt just a bit uneasy. He had heard that the rangers dispensed justice according to their own ways of thinking, and he knew that many of them were ex-outlaws. They knew that Grady was guilty of murdering one of their members, they had been faced with the possible problem of taking him by stage all the way to Austin for trial, and they were busy men working down here to stop a cattle war, with no time for such trivials.

And Blackie had said they had access to the jail keys.

Jude didn't know. That hard faced older one was capable of anything. He only knew that Grady hadn't committed suicide. Grady hadn't had the nerve. The rustling puncher had had his wrists tied behind him and then his own belt looped over his head. Somebody had got hold of his legs around the boot tops and pulled down hard until the puncher strangled.

No, Grady hadn't hung himself.

He had been executed.

Jude got his horse out of the corral, ignoring Bronson's excited comments and gestulations toward the dead calf lying in a corner of a corral, the bare area where the hide had been skinned off showing red in the morning sun. The cow was bawling and sniffing at it, her udder beginning to swell. Jude mounted and rode over into town.

NELL and Edwina came up the street, the former dressed in boots, split riding skirt, shirt, and a light colored hat with a broad brim. Jude reined over alongside the boardwalk. The two women stopped.

"I'm getting ready to go back to the ranch," he said, touching his hat brim. "Blackie said you were going back this morning, Miss Travers, and for me to take good care of you. When are you ready to leave?"

"Oh, he did now, did he?" Nell demanded indignantly. "Just who does that sheriff think he is anyhow?" She tossed her head. It was a gesture of indignation.

"In that case, Miss Travers, I'll go on out and get to work. I saw the Doc this morning. Cic's all right. The bullet's out. I'll tell your father. He'll probably send a wagon in after him."

The two women looked up at him, sitting easily in the saddle, the wildness of the winter in a line camp still not obliterated from him despite the haircut and shave. The pistol that had killed three more men lay in its sheath, another's dark butt jutting up out of a sheath on the left fork of the saddle. Heavy stock of a .44-40 protruding from its saddle scabbard beneath his left saddle skirt.

"So you don't want to ride out home with me?" Nell Travers demanded.

"I didn't say that."

"You acted like it."

"I'd be glad to ride home with you."

"Well . . . then don't sit there like a ninny. Go down to Bronson's and get my horse. I'll wait for you at Edwina's."

They watched him jog off along the street and walked on toward Edwina's shop.

"Gee, Edwina," Nell said. "It's like I told you last night. That crazy gun fighting cowboy gives me the tingles all over. Did you ever feel that way when you looked at a man?"

"Yes, dear."

"Oh, of course. Blackie."

"Yes," Edwina said quietly.

CHAPTER XXXI

HE brought back her horse and picked her up at Edwina's shop, and as they rode down across the flats to Dr. Vogel's modest house the ex-singer, watching them go, realized what a perfectly matched pair they were; she turned seventeen and eager to fall in love and Jude nineteen. And she, Edwina Cochran, an ex-dancehall entertainer older than the both of them.

Cic was half propped up in bed, one side of him white with new bandages, being fed breakfast by the doctor's wife. He listened in amazement as Jude told him of the nights events and how Grady had committed "suicide."

Dr. Vogel was in the kitchen having his own breakfast, a bottle of whiskey beside him and a big black tomcat in his lap.

"Oh, so it's you?" he grunted. "I'm glad you shot straight—or I'd have had to patch up three more of the damned fools. Much prefer to hold up a new born kid and slap life into his back. Sit down," he ordered brusquely.

Jude sat down. "Doc, you're the coroner here, ain't you?" A nod.

"Can I trust you to do something for me on the sly?"

The doctor paused with a fork half way to his mouth and glared. "Put your cards on the table, young man, and stop beating around the bush!" he snapped.

Jude put them on the table, telling of what he had witnessed, and of his suspicions that Grady had been hung.

"I just want to make sure," Jude finished. "When you hold the inquest try to find out, will you? And tell nobody."

"Hmmm. Maybe you're not just a plug-ugly killing cow puncher after all, young fellow. You got a head on you. Who do you think did it?"

"Those two rangers," Jude lied. "He'd killed one of their men and would have hung anyhow, and they couldn't take time to leave here before there's a cattle war brewing. Owsley of the Eight Cross is starting his herds over on the land they bought in a few more days. Travers is going to meet him with guns. Those rangers can't leave. And because they're rangers that's why you've got to turn in a suicide verdict. Nobody could prove anything anyhow."

"Well," growled the doctor, rising, "the thief got what he deserved anyhow. Stay around here until I get back."

It didn't take him long, less than an hour. He came back and bustled into the bedroom where Jude and Nell still chatted with Cic. He glared at Cic and then at his wife. "Not more than three drinks of my whiskey a day," he snarled and looked at Jude.

Jude followed him into the kitchen and Dr. Vogel turned. He nodded. "You're right, youngster. A blow on the back of his head, just enough to stun him. Probably a gun barrel. I noticed those rope marks and the slipped boot too. Suicide. Case closed."

"Thanks, Doc."

Nell came in and they went out and swung up for the ride back to the ranch. They started across the flats and Vogel stuck his head out the front door. "And tell Travers to send in a wagon and get this fool outa here before he eats me out of house and home and drinks up all my whiskey. I want my bed back!" he bawled after them.

They turned and waved and rode on, reaching the ranch shortly before noon. Jude was amazed at the change. The big white house gleamed like a monster glacier from its position on the knoll, sweeping the country in all its grandeur. It was more than two hundred yards from the corrals, so Jude rode over with the girl to the long, porticoed veranda on the east side. He and Nell had gotten along pretty

BAR
BATHS
Tillotson

Jude stood there calmly, his face a blank mask. Mercilessly, he deliberately emptied the sixgun into Blackie

well on the ride in. She had chatted gaily about her friendship with Edwina and the plans they had to go riding together when the weather warmed a little more. Now she swung down before the hitch rack her father had put up over her protests and Jude bent for her reins.

"Come on in and look the house over, Jude," she invited.

"Thanks, Miss Travers, but I'd better get on down and unsaddle. I'll look it over Saturday night."

Her eyes almost blazed at him. "All right *Mister* Gordon!" she flared at him. "And when you come in be sure and wipe your boots!" She ducked under the rail and strode angrily across the porch, disappearing through a tall door opened by a new woman servant.

Jude grinned ruefully and led her mount away. "No matter what I say to her, she just naturally goes on the prod," he muttered. "I guess there's something about me that she just don't like."

He met Peanut in the corral as he was unsaddling. The quiet, graved-faced little man came over and stuck out a hand. Word of the shooting already had reached the ranch by some mysterious means.

"Hello, Colonel," Jude greeted. "Glad to see you again."

"Howya you theah, son?" the wrangler replied. "So you done it ag'in?"

"I had to, Colonel. They got Cic first." He didn't want to talk about it, not even with this man he liked so much. Jude changed the subject. "How's old Bugger coming along?" he grinned.

Peanut grinned back. "Well, suh, few weeks ago Bugguh done took Jessie into town and married her. Theh're living in Nute's old house—an' does she beat thet nigguh aroun'! He's about the mos' onhappy nigguh I evah saw in mah life. Nute's up in the old ranchouse with his wife an' kids."

"Poor Bugger. Say, you sure did a nice job on the house, Colonel. Bet you could make money doing it in town all the time. How's things on the ranch?"

"Lotsa changes, son. Some of the old hands drifted durin' the winteh, couple or three moah got fiued. Plenty of new men. All the old han's who went up the trail are still heah, includin' Ike. Thet likkuh drinkin' bird of hisn didn't hatch thet egg. Set on it foah two months an' then he cussed it an' kicked it out on the floah. Ike was some riled, ah reckon."

They both laughed and went on up to the bunkhouse.

TRAVERS sent a wagon after Cic, the wounded puncher swearing he wasn't going to miss any celebration where there was a barrel of free whiskey handy. They brought him home—to Doctor Vogel's openly expressed relief—and Cic, lounging in a bunk, had to tell over and over again about the fight in which Jude had killed the three nesters; and because Jude had saved his life the story lost nothing with the telling.

Saturday morning found a group of people on the porch of Sol's store, watching the stage come in. It was loaded to overflowing with very tired and bedraggled easterners who had ridden all night. Jude, lounging against the wall of the store, waited. He smoked a cigarette, hat on the back of his head, right hip with the pistol thrust out, a thumb hooked in the cartridge belt. He heard a chorus of girlish greetings among Nell and two rather pretty girls about her age, watched Mrs. Travers introduce herself to two women and two well dressed businessmen.

They went off up the street to the hotel on the corner to allow the visitors a chance to clean up and eat breakfast. Jude had an idea that after they arrived back at the ranch the Stantons and Bordens would sleep most of the day until the evening festivities began. Bag after bag and trunk after trunk was unlashed and tossed down to be stacked on the porch. Joe was up on the north boundary with bedroll wagon, stacking summer supplies in the line camps and leaving some orders from Nute Shelby with the Hensen foreman about the spring roundup, which would be held separate from the T4. They were going to slash brand everything and restamp with the T4.

So presently Bronson's stablehand, a youth named Toby, rattled up in a light livery rig. Jude helped him load all the baggage and watched him set off with it for the ranch. He debated a morning drink, changed his mind, and went up to kill time with Edwina in her shop until the others were ready to go. She drew him like a magnet. Blackie strolled by before Jude reached the shop and exchanged greetings.

"Going up to see Edwina?" He grinned.

"Thought I might," Jude said carelessly. "Nothing else to do."

"Except see Edwina. You like her pretty well, don't you, Jude? Yeah," his tone a little edged, "and she likes you too. You wouldn't have any ideas about moving in on that range, would you, Jude?"

"If I get any, I'll try to move in, Blackie," was the quiet reply.

"Don't," the sheriff said coldly. "Don't ever make that foolish mistake, Jude. Edwina's still my woman and no man is going to cut in ahead of me. You or anybody else. You know," he went on in a milder tone, "it sorta looked like our trails have parted. There was a time when I figured that you and me were to become pardners. But it seems at every turn of the road, Jude, I find you there either blocking it or complicating things for me. We're not the same kind of pardners we used to be. You were a green nester kid and I was a cow puncher who got you started. Now you're a death dealing gun fighter with six notches filed—"

"Not notches, Blackie."

"—and I'm the lawman who's liable to either have to hang you or outlaw you. Looks like our trails not only have parted. They've swung around until they're meeting head on. I hope I don't ever have to go after you, Jude."

"So do I."

"Well, I'll be moseying. And remember what I said: from now on you keep away from Edwina. She's my woman and I'll kill any man who tries to take her away from me."

So it was out in the open at last. Jude had known it was coming, felt the rising tide, the wide gulf that now separated them. They no longer were merely drifting on different trails.

They were enemies.

"Remember," Blackie warned, "Don't go in that shop."

HE moved off down the boardwalk toward Sol's store, the worn butts of the two heavy pistols bobbing to and fro with each step. Jude leaned there against the wall for a few moments. Then he too moved along the boardwalk. He went in and took off his hat.

"Hello, Jude!" Edwina exclaimed. "I saw you come in. I was hoping you'd drop by."

CHAPTER XXXII

PRESENTLY the party came into the hotel lobby, looking much refreshed. Stanton was tall and distinguished looking with grey hair and a close clipped mustache. Borden, his partner in various business and financial enterprises, was much shorter and bald.

The eight of them stepped out onto the porch and the men began looking the town over.

"We're growing up pretty fast," Mrs. Travers explained. "Nesters everywhere and more coming in. But it's still a pretty wild place at times."

"So I heard," smiled Stanton. "Stage driver spoke of a terrible gun fight here just day before yesterday afternoon; three men killed, another shot."

"It was two of our boys," Mrs. Travers replied. "I hate the shooting affairs of these wild cowboys, but we're having a little trouble with the nesters. It'll blow over in time."

"Who did it?"

"That boy coming from the livery in that surrey."

Mrs. Borden, a motherly looking woman of about forty, stared. The two eastern girls' eyes had widened.

"Why," Mrs. Borden gasped out. "He's no more than a boy! He doesn't look dangerous."

"Neither," Nell cut in, "does a rattlesnake until it coils to strike. That 'boy' there has killed six men in gun fights, Mrs. Borden."

Julie Stanton, a pretty girl with dark eyes and hair, shuddered. "Is he going to drive us? I'm afraid of him."

Nell laughed. "Yes, and he'll be a lot more scared of you, dear. He's been on the ranch for months and he still calls me 'Miss Travers.' And I warn the both of you—don't try taking him away from me. He's mine. That is," she added laughingly, "if he'll ever stop calling me by my last name and try to make love to me."

"Nell!" gasped out her mother in horror. She turned to the two other women. "You'll just have to excuse her. She was pretty much of a lady when she arrived home from school—in fact, her Pa thinks almost too much. But it's all wore off now. She rides all over the range, shoots jackrabbits with a light rifle, eats with the

hands in the dugout, and hangs around the corrals. I wouldn't be surprised if she doesn't try her hand at topping a bronk one of these days. And now talking like that!"

"Well, it's true," her daughter answered defiantly. "I do everything I can to make Jude make love to me—"

It ended in another horrified gasp from her mother.

Jude had swung the rented surrey in alongside the one the three of them had driven from the ranch. He sat there with the reins in hand, feeling a little embarrassed under the curious gaze of six easterners. He supposed it was because he was about the first cow puncher that any of them had seen up close.

"You girls get in with Jude," Mrs. Travers said. "I'll drive the rest of you folks out in our rig."

"Julie, you get up front with Jude," Nell directed. "Helen and I will ride in the back. Girls, this is Jude Gordon. Jude, Julie and Helen."

Jude touched his hatbrim and nodded and then slid over to the left side of the seat. He twisted the heavy six shooter sheathed at his right thigh around to make room for the girl. She was looking at it with a kind of delicious fascination.

"All set?" he asked.

"Turn 'em loose," Nell replied gaily. "And don't worry, girls, if they shy at a coyote or a rattlesnake and break to run, Jude can hold them down."

They jogged out of town at a trot, the girls talking and chattering. Jude kept his face to the front and devoted his attention to driving. After a few miles Julie Stanton lost her fear of him and began to talk. He answered with "Yes, ma'm," and "No, ma'm," and kept on driving.

Presently he became aware that Nell, with two companions to embolden her, was bedevilling him.

"We're going to have a wonderful time tonight. We've got all the furniture in the two big rooms pushed back against the walls and the carpets carried out. That floor is as smooth as glass, and Pa's hired two fiddlers, two guitars, a mandolin, and a woman from town to play the big new piano. You're going to dance with Julie and Helen several times, aren't you, Jude."

"All right," he said shortly.

"He's so talkative," commented Nell, her eyes dancing. "He'll talk for hours like that. You see he's been up in a line camp all winter—" she had to stop and answer questions as to what a line camp was—"he's been there all winter with nesters shooting at him, and catching rustlers—he brought one in Thursday who had killed a ranger—that's what brought on the gun fight when a nester shot Cic and Jude killed the three of them—and now he likes to talk. He'll talk you to death, and he'll be making eyes at you and trying to get you off around the corner of the house tonight and hug you in the dark—"

Jude turned in the seat, his face a flaming crimson. "I wish you'd shut up," he said bluntly.

Surprise widened her eyes. Then she went off into peals of delighted laughter and the other two took it up. The three of them shrieked, and Jude, his face redder than ever, breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the ranch. He watched them get down and then drove on down to unharness.

THE festivities started just at sundown. All through the late afternoon rigs and riders on horseback had been arriving. The cut up parts of the butchered steer were still turning on the spits under Pokey and Ike's critical eyes. Admiral Big Bottom—still referred to as a "he" despite the disgrace he'd brought upon both Ike and himself by laying a sterile egg—perched on the side of a big goods box and squawked, "Bilge water!" at everybody who passed by and eyed them with his evil, beady eyes. A big keg of whiskey had been set up not far from the veranda, with scores of tin cups on a table, and men and women were strolling over the grass, talking and laughing. And right beside the whiskey was a big box over which Nute Shelby kept a critical eye. It was filled with gunbelts and pistols. There was going to be no whiskey gun fight to mar the housewarming.

Long tables had been set up and on these Ike and Pokey laid cut up chunks of meat. It was warm and juicy, and there were pickles and heaping piles of biscuits and sweet bread to go with it.

Jude came up from the bunkhouse with his boots newly shined and his thick shock of finely spun hair slicked down. He saw Nell and the two other girls in a group

of women and promptly went over the other way, to where Cic sat propped up on his tarp near the whiskey keg. Everywhere was laughter and good natured banter. Blackie was in the midst of it, laughing and talking with everyone, and rebutting jeers from his former bunkhouse mates about his soft job. Jude saw Edwina, lovely in a long flowing dress, pinched in at the waist, the lights from the open windows and doors reflecting from her golden hair. Jude had never believed a woman could be so beautiful and desirable. She had the gracious manners of a woman of the world. She was laughing and talking with Sol and his wife, Sol unbending long enough to have a couple of drinks from the keg.

Travers stood on the porch, host to the two men from the east. He was pointing out to the financiers the sweep of his southern range, now being closed in under a blanket of darkness.

"But the trouble is," he said, "that these nesters are buying out from under me. I've fought the idea of paying money for land but it looks like I'm licked."

"Why? It'll be worth money in years to come. A few cents an acre, and the way this country is growing?" asked Stanton.

"I know. I've finally come to realize it. But I've just bought another outfit that's took all my ready cash — that and this house. Gentlemen, I'm flat broke until I put my next herd up the trail to Abilene this summer. That's stating it blunt. What I'm worried about is that before I can come back with more cash and get legal title to my range, the nesters will have closed in on me. I can't buck them in a bunch. So I'm going to say it flatly: if you two men would like to invest—including the profits of the herd going up this summer—I'll see that you get interest on your money. Think it over for a few days and let me know. Well, let's forget business and get those fiddlers going. We're going to dance through until daylight."

He stuck his head through a window and called to one of the fiddlers, who was tuning up. The man nodded, put down the instrument, and went on a hunt for the others. Presently the first strains of a waltz floated out of the huge house with its wide open double doors, and the celebration was on.

Stanton and Borden stood talking. "Well, what do you think, Jim?" the shorter man asked.

"I'd say loan, not invest. Take a first mortgage. I checked up a bit before we came out. The east is going to be saturated with beef in a few more years and prices might drop. Then there's droughts, floods, disease, not to speak of these fellows they call rustlers. We'll talk it over later."

The two rangers had put in appearance, taking off their gun belts. They leaned a pair of repeating rifles against the box. One of them carried a large roll of paper beneath his arm.

Doctor Vogel got himself a drink from the keg. He turned as Cic's voice called. "Hey, Doc, bring me one, will you?"

"You see?" Vogel snarled at Jude. "It's just like I told you. It's not enough that I have to patch them up, I've got to play servant too." He poured from the spigot into another tin cup and carried it over.

"Ah, that's fine, Doc," Cic said. "You kin take back this empty and fill it fer me later."

"Hell I will!" snapped the physician; and added gruffly: How do you feel? That wound open up on the ride back in the wagon? I told that fool cow puncher to drive carefully."

"Nope," replied the cheerful Cic.

"Probably cauterized," was the snapped reply. "With my whiskey. From the inside."

THE early evening was marred by but one minor incident. Right in the middle of a double square dance Admiral Big Bottom, loaded to the ears with whiskey, plopped his green bundle of feathers squarely through the double doors. He skidded for about fifteen feet on his tail feathers, horny feet thrust out in front of him in a frantic effort to put on the brakes. Then he got up in the middle of the dance floor as the music stopped with a crash and laughter rang out. The Admiral surveyed them all with a baleful stare and then started across the polished floor toward where Mrs. Borden sat in a chair along the wall, chatting with Mrs. Travers. The Admiral stopped directly before her crossed feet and eyed her with drunken gravity.

"Why, how cute!" the good lady exclaimed in delight. "A parrot."

"Bilge water!" retorted the Admiral.

Ike came flying in through the doorway, his white apron in contrast to his boots. He hurried across the floor in the face of more laughter. The dancers stood poised on the floor, arms around their pardners.

"Ahoy, you blasted swab!" Ike roared at the bird. "Get back to the galley where you belong."

"Go to hell!" screeched Admiral Big Bottom.

Ike's face changed color as he looked at Mrs. Borden.

"You'll have to excuse the swab, lady," he said. "He was a perfect gentleman when I brought 'im here, but he's been around these blasted steer punchers so long he's picked up a bit o' rough langwige. But he don't usually cuss like that in front of ladies. Come here, you g— you swab."

"An' we threw the rotten bos'n in the ocean," came the croaking reply, and he gave Mrs. Borden what was almost a beady-eyed, evil leer.

Ike, his face red, hurriedly scooped him up and almost fled out the front door.

"Parrot puncher, parrot puncher!" jeered Mike Kessler, standing beside Stanton and Borden, at the scuttling cook's retreating back.

The flustered cook threw an oath over his shoulder and the man who had tended the branding fire the day Mike got tangled up with the yearling gave off with a derisive snicker. He had been regaling the two men with an account of the incident.

"So there they lay on the ground, Mike an' this yearlin'," he continued in the face of Mike's glares. "This yearlin' would slobber in Mike's face an' then Mike would slobber in the yearlin's face. Purty soon Mike says, 'How's Paw and Maw gittin' along?' An' the yearlin' he says, 'Purty good except that Maw is powerful sad these days. Paw, the old fool, quit her an' run away with a young red heifer. An' she wants to know when you're comin' home. So thet only leaves the three of us in the fambly now—you, me an' maw.' So Mike says, 'Thet's too bad. I'll hev to go and see the old she-devil one of these years.' So the yearlin' he asts Mike, 'What brand you wearin'?' An' Mike says, T4 with a V-gotch under my right ear. They got me in the roundup last year because I'm a year older'n you . . .'"

Stanton collapsed. He sat down in a porch chair, leaned back and roared. Borden shook so hard he spilled part of his coffee, watching the hasty retreat Mike was beating for the supper table.

"Just you wait," Mike was muttering under his breath. "You won't think it's so funny the night you comes home from town and finds a six foot bullsnake in your bunk, Mister Floyd."

CHAPTER XXXIII

JUDE had claimed Edwina for his first dance, floating across the smooth floor with her in a waltz. She danced as smoothly as a feather, and beneath the silk handkerchief he held at the back of her waist to keep the sweat from soiling her dress he felt the smooth play of her body.

She pushed back far enough to look at him. "Jude I never dreamed you were such a smooth dancer. Where did you learn?"

"Up home among the nesters," he answered and they both laughed.

He was unaware that over across the room Nell's eyes were expressing indignation. As the owner's daughter, she felt that he should have waited for her to have one free and then claim her. But the ranch punchers, putting down their first flush of bashfulness, had finally got started and were giving the three girls a busy time of it. Blackie was claiming dance after dance with Nell, whispering softly in her ear.

Edwina closed against Jude again. "Be careful, Jude," she whispered. "Blackie came into my room last night and warned me to keep away from you. He says that I'm still his woman and that I like—that I'll be no other man's as long as he wants it that way. Jude, I'm getting a little afraid of him. He could be dangerous, now that he's got the law on his shoulders."

"I wouldn't let it worry you."

"I'm not worried about myself. He'll kill you."

"He might give it a try. I'll worry about that when the time comes."

He finally claimed Nell, who was properly indignant. They were quarrelling by the time the dance ended. They had a few more square dances and then the musicians put down their instruments and went out to refresh themselves at the barrel and to eat. It was along toward midnight. The two rangers had taken no part in the festivities except to have a couple of small

drinks and chat amiably with the hands standing around on the porch and watching through the doors and windows.

Then, as intermission set in, they went inside, looking out of place on the now deserted floor.

"Mr. Travers?" his wife said, in answer to a question by one of them. "Why, yes, Pa's in there in that other room. Right through that door there." She pointed.

"Thank you, ma'm," replied the younger.

They moved toward the door, the older man with the hard face trailing. They knocked and Travers' voice called, "Come in."

"Sorry to intrude, Mr. Travers," the younger man said. "We didn't know you had company."

"It's all right, boys. Mr. Stanton and Borden are talking over some business with me. These men are Hardin and Rennel, Texas Rangers working in here to help stop this rustling."

Hardin, the younger, shook hands and so did Rennel. Hardin took the big roll of paper from beneath his arm.

"We could come back later," he suggested.

"Not at all. I presume it concerns the ranch and these other men have a right to sit in and listen. They might invest out here and might as well start learning now. What is it, boys?"

Hardin unrolled the paper and spread it out on the table. It was criss-crossed with various lines that showed rivers and mountains and newly surveyed boundaries.

"Here's the set up, Mr. Travers. Last year the Eight Cross outfit bought title to a big strip of land covering several miles long and three or four wide. That land goes over onto your boundary, or what you've always considered your boundary. It's legally owned by that ranch. We talked to Owsley, the foreman, up on the Cap Rock the other day and he says he's about to start six hundred head grazing on that range. He also says you've got men up there with guns to stop him when he comes over."

"I have," Travers said harshly.

Hardin shook his head. "That's just the trouble. It's why we're here. The Texas Rangers are backing them up because they're in the right. They have title to that land, which will make you a trespasser. If you follow through what you say you aim to, we'll have to come after you with a warrant. If any Eight Cross man is killed, whichever one of your men who does the shooting will hang or go to prison. We're down here to tell you to back up to the new boundary made by the surveyors."

IT WAS a hard blow. It almost staggered Travers. He looked at the two silent easterners and something like a sigh went out of him. "You see what I was saying, men. I helped clear this country of the Comanches. My mother had her head split open by one of the red devils. I came back from the war, got my outfit together, and took over what I thought I was entitled to. Now they're buying land on my range, trimming me from all sides. They're using money from the sale of my own rustled cattle to whittle me down. A two gunman named Red Tolliver, over to the south, slipped in and cut off two miles of my boundary along the river just the other day. And do you know what the cattle rustling dog did? He registered a T iron with a mark that can be run over my 4 and make a perfect brand blotting job—a kind of arrowhead. That's what he calls it. The TA. Gentlemen, I want to borrow enough money to buy up every foot of my present range. I want the deal swung as quickly as possible before they cut me down still more. Name your own terms and rate of interest, but get me that money!"

He turned to the two waiting rangers. "All right, boys. I'll call off my men. That thieving outfit, burning my H Bar brand into an Eight Cross, is cleaning me. I know when I'm licked. I'm bull headed in a lot of ways but I know when I'm bucking a stacked deck."

The rangers thanked him and went out. There was silence in the room for a moment. The two easterners exchanged glances. Finally Stanton spoke.

"All right, Travers. Get your surveyors to work at once and then let us know how much you need. You'll get it. A first mortgage on the ranch buildings and land and cattle, plus all equipment. I think you can come out all right."

Stanton was still chuckling inwardly over the branding fire incident; and neither the punchers or Travers would ever know that that story was the means of such a quick decision. The financier figured that

if these western men from the plains of Texas possessed such a lusty sense of humor, then they would be a good financial gamble.

The house-warming celebration broke up at daylight. Everybody was danced out, tired, happy. The punchers went toward the bunkhouse to roll in and sleep most of the day through. The guests from the east repaired to their rooms. Saddled horses and rigs came alive, Travers and his wife seeing the last of them depart. It was something none of them would forget for a long time. Pokey and Ike snored in their bunks, dead drunk, and the sleepy Admiral on his perch occasionally opened a beady eye and muttered croaking sounds before closing it again.

They cleaned up the remnants of the celebration and life flowed back into regular channels. The spring, or calf, roundup got under way and was soon over, Shelby and Travers aghast at the losses. The rustlers were taking them from all sides. Travers pared his herds down to the bone, picking out not only old cows but stuff he needed for stockers. And still the best he could do was twenty-five hundred head.

The outfit got ready for the drive to Abilene. Those who had gone up the year before would remain behind and give the rest of the hands a chance. Ike rolled out in the chuckwagon, the protesting Admiral in an improvised cage.

The herd was on its way.

It was the summer of 1870. Abilene had had four years as a rip-roaring trail town. It had one more to go before, in 1871, new names would begin to spring up. Hays. Ellsworth. And the famed Dodge City, as the railroad pushed on further west and swung south, making for a shorter drive.

Jude worked the summer through on the ranch, riding from dawn until dark. He seldom went to town anymore.Twice men fired at him from long range and he sold the .44-40 repeater and bought himself a .52 caliber single shot Sharps. It was heavy for a saddle gun, but it would throw a 550-grain slug of lead a lot further than the powder charge back of the repeater's slugs. He grew shaggy-haired and more silent, withdrawing more from bunkhouse life. There had been an election that summer and Blackie, with no opponent, was now duly elected sheriff. Nobody else wanted the job in the face of what still could become a cattle war. Hardin and Renner had disappeared. Gone like shadows. Travers owned his land now, barring the first mortgage held by the departed easterners.

The outfit rolled in from Kansas again with only two punchers missing. One had quit. The other had been killed in a gun fight. Admiral Big Bottom had sunk his beak into the nose of an over friendly barkeep and ended up in jail with Ike, croaking "Bilge water!" and cursing the jailers with salty oaths.

It had been a dry summer, the grass burned to a crisp. Nute Shelby hadn't gone up this year, sending another man as trail boss, a man who had been up twice before. Shelby rode all the hours of daylight, studying the lean cattle and looking at waterholes. He bought scrapers and put men to work down in the bottoms of the gullies and arroyos, peeling away at the red earth and using the dirt to make small dams.

THE herd had brought a good price but not as much as the year before. Cattle by the tens of thousands were pouring up the trail, their owners eager to harvest the golden bonanza. Travers paid the slightly exorbitant rates on the mortgage, rode with Shelby, and shook his head. He was being rustled dry, some of his older stuff wouldn't come through the winter, and with so many of his stockers now already in the slaughter houses his herds had fallen off alarmingly.

On the contrary, the Nester Pool had jumped to twenty-five hundred head. The Eight Cross was expanding. Red Tolliver swaggered about town, prosperous and contented. His TA iron was going on T4 cows and calves alike.

It had been a hard year and none of them realized it more than Jude. He had become an automaton. His hair was down over his ears, long and shaggy, his equipment worn. But he had never lost faith. This was a bad year. Any outfit had to expect such things. He was now twenty years old, Nell eighteen. He saw her at intervals, usually down by the corrals or out on the range. He had not been in the big house since the night of the celebration.

They made the fall roundup; and when

it was over the results were appalling. Travers would be lucky if he could put fifteen hundred head up the trail the next year.

Blackie and his two deputies had made some show of going after the rustlers. They had arrested four different men and presented what appeared to be solid evidence, but the jury was packed with nester men who just as promptly freed them. But the pool was breaking up now. It had become so prosperous that many of the men were now running small spreads of their own. They were living off the increases of the stock, buying more and rustling others. Their spreads were growing, a dozen new brands cropping up here and there.

It was the beginning of the heydey of the small cowman. The disintegration of the early barons who controlled as many as ten counties.

On a night that fall, when the weather began to turn a bit cold, the sheriff sat in the Eight Cross ranch house up on the Cap Rock. There were about thirty men present. These represented the north side of the pool. There was the wisp of smoke from cigars, plenty of whiskey, and an air of well being. They had just finished dividing up the profits of the big drive to Abilene, most of it rustled from the T4 and quite a lot more from a couple of big spreads sixty miles north. The money had been counted out and put away when Blackie finally leaned back in his chair. He rose and flicked the ashes off a fifty cent cigar. The buzz of voices gradually died down.

"Well, boys, it's been a good year and they'll get better. Now . . . shall I make a long speech or a short one?" he grinned.

Coarse laughter followed this. "Hell, we got plenty of time, sheriff. Tawk till yu git outa breath."

"That means more or less to make it short. So I won't be too long. I called you up here for a little more than just to divide up the money each of you had coming according to the number of head he contributed to the Pool's trail herd this year. I have, of course, already met with the boys down south and gave them their share. I told them the same thing that I'm going to tell you. We're growing, but at the same time we've got to change our methods to meet changing conditions. The country's settling up that fast. In the beginning Travers and these other big owners far up north had up to forty or fifty square miles of range and sometimes more. They had cattle by the thousands and not too many men to handle them. It was a rustler's paradise—and, I might add, we made the most of it during the past couple of years."

This one filled the room with a burst of course laughter.

"You came here, most of you," the sheriff went on, "with a pair of oxen or maybe a broken down team with big patches on the seat of your britches, your wife with one dirty dress, and your kids half naked. Now some of you are freighting in building supplies and putting up pretty comfortable places. Your kids are growing up. There's been four country schools started up this way alone during the past year with paid teachers. Two or three years ago when you went into a store—that is, any except Sol's in Alden—you were a dirty, stinking, starving nester and where was your money before they brought out the goods? Today the story is quite a bit different. You're small cowmen now. It means you're on your way up and the pioneer cattlemen like Harry Travers is on his way out. You've got money and you're expanding. You're prosperous. Some of you will end up as big time cowmen because you swung a long loop to get your start, depending upon your business ability. Others among you will wind up broke and working for wages because you didn't have the business ability.

"The point that I'm stressing is that times have changed and we've got to change with them. The rustling bonanza of two years ago is over. The law is tightening up. I put four of you back of bars these past months because you lost your heads and got too greedy and too careless. I had to do it for the protection of the others. And I packed the jury with nesters who just as quickly turned you loose. Not a verdict took over fifteen minutes."

A BIG man with hulking shoulders and a black beard came to his feet, scowling and waving a bottle of whiskey. "Thet's a goddam lie," he shouted. "It was eighteen minutes before they turned *me* loose."

Loud *haw-haws* filled the room and a

man grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him down into his chair. "Sit down, Sid. You wuz caught plumb red handed with two rustled cows an' calves an' eighteen minutes ain't much time to spend to make a try fer four critters."

Sid sat down. "Eighteen minutes hell!" he snorted. "What about them two days I laid in jail before the Pool bailed me out. An' I didn't get the cows an' calves after all," he complained.

Jed Owsley, foreman for Blackie and a big shouldered man not unlike Nute Shelby in manners, quieted them down. He was in with the Pool, working on a percentage basis with Blackie.

"Have yore fun, boys, but let Blackie finish," he told them.

"As I was saying, things are changing," Blackie went on in his smooth voice, "Your kids are growing up and going to their own schools and wearing decent clothes. They're eating something besides corn pone and molasses now. And it's up to you men to see to it that they grow up respectable. The kind of crude rustling that Grady got caught at is out. I want that clearly understood. Just about everyone of you now has enough cows to live off the increase and buy more with your profits. I want every man here to register his brand. Of course, if you get a chance to pick up a few calves here and there without risk you can do it. If you can slip out in a bad rainstorm while the creek is flooded, it'll be all right to drive a few head down and shoot the cows and let them float downstream and take the calves. But any good thing has to come to an end and the bonanza is over. The rustling we do from now on is going to be done by younger men picked for their jobs. Instead of stampeding a herd and running off two hundred head like we did that night up on Gamma Creek in Kansas we'll have forty or fifty younger men of the Pool pick out their calves, scout the lay of the land for days to check on the line riders, and play it safe.

"I can tell you now that Travers is hard hit. He bought his range all right, but he bought it with borrowed money from two eastern financiers who're sinking their claws in for the interest on the loan. His T4 ranch is mortgaged to the hilt. I've been in touch with these two men—their names are Borden and Stanton—and I've painted a pretty black picture of Travers' position. I've got them worried. They're beginning to think they've made a bad investment. I told them that there was scab among Travers' cattle."

"But there ain't," a man's voice spoke up.

Blackie grinned at the speaker. "There will be," he said softly. "Red Tolliver has two hundred head of critters so covered with scab that they hardly have any hair left. I've never seen such mangy critters in all my life. As soon as the T4 brands that Red and some of the boys put on them heal a bit more they're going to be shoved over onto the T4 range and scattered among Travers' prime beef. We're going to put him out of business. And at the right moment, when Borden and Stanton, these two eastern men, get bluffed enough to foreclose, I'm going to sell the T4 ranch at public auction on the courthouse steps in Alden, and that mortgage is going to be bought up by money from the Nester Pool!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THAT one brought on a demonstration of sheer exuberance, partly whiskey and cigar inspired. They slapped each other on the back, whooped and yelled. Only one man of them all beside Blackie stood silent: Jed Owsley. The cold faced foreman of the Eight Cross stood with his hard back against the wall and said nothing. He looked and Blackie, tolerance in it, and Blackie returned the look. The noise finally quieted down. The men of the northern section of the Pool resumed their seats. The cigar smoke roiled higher, grew thicker, and somebody finally opened a door.

Blackie looked them over. "Have I made everything clear?" he asked.

"Clear as we want it," a man's voice answered.

"All right. Then we're breaking up the Nester Pool as of tonight."

It got quiet in the room. They dropped their cigars low between fingers and stared at him. This they didn't understand.

"But you just said—" a man began.

"I said we'd buy up Travers' mortgage, bid in at public auction when the time comes, with Pool money. But each man will get range according to how much he

contributes." Blackie's voice was sharp. "From now on it's up to each one of you individually. We'll go on rustling along the lines I just laid out. We've got to break Travers' back. From now on each of you who rustle a cow will do so at the risk of his own neck. The rangers have drifted but the law still has to be upheld. I'll arrest any man of you caught in the actual act of running off Travers' cattle. I want that clearly understood. Of course," he added with his good natured smile, "I'll try to pack the jury and see that you get off."

This one brought loud guffaws. Men looked at each other and grinned. Jed Owsley still stood with his back to the wall, something that was almost a frown on his poker face. The smoke roiled, drifted out the open door.

"We'll work slow and carefully from now on," the sheriff continued. "We'll scab Travers' herd until they'll spend most of their time scratching instead of grazing. And one word of warning," he added sharply. "If you see a scabbed cow or calf up this way in the coming months, don't rustle it. Make damned sure of that. When I sell Travers out at auction, and we buy up, we'll go out and clean the range, shooting and burning every carcass. Scab's a damned bad thing. All it takes is for a scabby cow to brush a mesquite limb and then another cow, coming along the trail, to brush the same limb. Next thing you know she's got it too. But we don't want to kill the goose that laid the golden egg. So watch your step, boys. That's about all I've got to say. Jed Owsley here is going to pick the younger men to do these special rustling jobs. The rest of you are going to rustle at your own risks. Any more questions?"

A man rose. He tossed the remains of his cigar to the floor. It emitted sparks and then slowly died in ashes.

"Yes, sheriff. You said we wuz to register all our brands. You own the Cross Eight. You goin' to register it? Any Ranger or anybody else could find out who owns it thet way. It mightn't look so good for yu if people found out the Eight Cross is yore property."

"The ranch will ge registered in Jed Owsley's name, as owner. We'll fix it up next week. Any more before I head back to Alden tonight?"

Owsley's shoulders moved away from the wall. He was as tall as Nute Shelby, nearly as blonde.

"I've got one, Blackie. This side winder kid called Jude. First, you were going to bring him in the Pool. Then you were going to take care of him so's he wouldn't cause us anymore trouble. I hear he's still down on the T4."

"That's a fair question, Jed, and I'll answer it. I picked that kid up in Kansas because I figured he'd be a good man for us. He proved it in Abilene when he killed Harrison, who was throwing a shot at my back. You all know—or don't you?—that I was supposed to kill Harrison. He had organized the Pool. He was head of it. But he was so greedy that he was making each of you pay him a percentage of your cows on that fifteen hundred head the nesters sent north the first year. It was agreed that I was to take over in his boots, and he must have got wind of it somehow. I made two plays at him and he backed down before he finally tried to put one into me from behind while I was playing the roulette wheel. It was that nester kid Jude who grabbed one of my guns and did the job for me. He killed Harrison. I tried to swing him my way with a deputy's badge but it didn't seem to work. Before I hardly could turn around he'd got Tabor, Jergens, Porter, and those other two. But I warned him about several things, and you notice he's been pretty quiet these past months."

"Fair enough, Blackie," Owsley replied. "But he broke loose twice since he came back. Five men from the Pool. When's he going to do it again?"

"He won't, Jed. If he does I'll arrest him on sight and then bring in his body after he tried to 'escape.' Fair enough?"

The foreman grunted. "Fair enough, I reckon."

The meeting broke up and the sheriff started the long night ride back to Alden, feeling better than he had ever felt in his life. Things were shaping up just right. He seemed to be making progress with Nell, after long months of talking to her every time she came to town; she was young and impressionable enough to come to him once he had command and possession of the big white house where she now lived; and from it, with her as mistress, he could direct operations and control

politics. The thought was a pleasant one.

Blackie rode on through the night, pleased with the world and himself.

At the same moment Jude was in his bunk at the T4, wide awake and staring into the darkness while the others of the outfit snored soundly. He knew that conditions on the T4 were bad—far worse than Travers was admitting. He could see it in the drawn lines of Nute Shelby's face. But a puncher must be loyal to his outfit, and thus Jude had kept putting down the thoughts of saddling up one day and drifting.

THE restlessness was upon him again. He wasn't sure whether it was because he felt he had learned about all there was to know from work on the T4; it might have been the subconscious thought that the nesters had the upper hand and that a man must go far to greener fields if he wanted to get started on his own. It might have been the prescence of Nell, growing more beautiful every day—the occasional meetings with Edwina when he was in town, and those emotions she roused in him. He didn't know. He wondered if he would ever know.

He got up and went back to work the next day, and on a morning two weeks later he rode the south range. The line now had been pulled back more than three miles. Red Tolliver's cattle with that suspicious T brand followed by a crude arrowhead were on the old range further south, along the river bluffs. Jude dropped down a gully, worked his horse up the opposite side, and then stopped to stare.

Then action followed look. He bent in the saddle, jerked the heavy Sharps free of its scabbard, straightened. It went up to his shoulder and roared and the cow a hundred yards distance went down under the shocking impact of the 550 grain slug of lead. Jude levered out the smoking shell, inserted another, and rode over. He pulled up and looked down.

It didn't have much hair. Where the hair had been was mostly a mass of scabs. It was the mangiest critter he had ever seen, and he knew that wherever it had brushed a mesquite or cedar limb along the trails it was leaving a trail of infection. He cut a wide circle and began looking for more. Within an hour he had shot four more. He went spurring down a gully after a fifth and the report of the rifle from two hundred yards away caused him to swerve sharply into the brush. He saw a faint cloud of smoke up on the ridge and heard the drumming of hoofs.

Jude slapped the steel to his bronk and went hard after the would be dry gulcher. He drove his mount mercilessly up in a scrambling climb to the top of a ridge and saw the rider. He was spurring madly away, toward the sanctuary of a gully.

Jude hit the ground as his horse slid to its haunches. He dropped to a knee, took careful aim with the .52 caliber single shot, and another cloud of grey smoke wisped up with the heavy report. The distant horse did a running somersault, throwing its rider overhead, and Jude went forward at a run on foot, reloading. He came up to the top of where a woodrat's nest made a mound around the bole of a mesquite tree and saw his man. The other was down back of his dead horse, rifle up, peering.

Jude levelled the Sharps and aimed for the top side of the horse. He doubted that the slugs would pierce the carcass. He fired again and heard a startled yell, then broke down the side of the gully for a hundred yard sprint in his high heeled boots. When he came up again the man was still there. Slowly Jude lifted his hat, dangling it on a stick. A spurt of dust leaped up beneath it and he let the headgear drop out of sight. The downed rider came up, rifle ready, cautious. Jude rose too, rifle cocked at his shoulder.

"Throw up your hands!" he yelled.

A rifle came up instead and Jude felt the heavy kick of the single shot against his own shoulder. He dropped flat, reloaded from the belt around his waist that was now half .44's and half .52's for the rifle, and then raised once more. He got up and went forward, the gun half way to his shoulder.

The rustler was down, his gun off to one side. Jude came closer to the horribly coughing man, substituting his six shooter for the Sharps.

"How many of those scabs did you run over on our line?" he demanded.

"Go to . . . hell," coughed out Red Tolliver.

"Anybody with you?"

"Go . . . to hell."

"Who stampeded that herd up on Gramma Creek that night and shot Tolson?

Who killed Jim Underhill? Who's the real head of this Nester Pool?"

"Blackie . . . all of 'em Blackie," Tolliver gasped out, some kind of a terrible grin contorting his mouth and the lashless lids opened real wide. Then they closed with the chubby, red haired hands lying alongside the butts of the now two harmless pistols. It might have been sub-conscious, that last statement. Red might not have known what he was saying. But he had said it.

And now Red Tolliver was dead.

CHAPTER XXXV

THREE riders spurred into sight a short distance away, drumming hard, smashing down through the mesquites. They were bent over low in saddles.

"Don't shoot, Jude!" Mike Kessler yelled, straightening. "It's me—Mike!"

The two men with him were new men, line camp riders along the now whittled down south boundary. Jude lowered the Sharps and stood as they pounded up. They reined in hard, the barrels of their horses heaving.

"Holy cow!" Mike yelled again, swinging down. "Red Tolliver! You hurt, Jude?"

"No," Jude said. "I'm all right."

He said it in an absent kind of way, his thoughts off afar. Seven men now. Seven notches that had never been filed on his gun. And he knew this was the end. The end for him as far as the T4 was concerned. It was the end of many things in many ways. Harry Travers, for instance. Harry Travers might be able to pull through and he might not. He might be able to hold his range and still be the biggest cowman among them all. But the term "settler" and "nester" were going out of date. Out of them and their rustling was coming a new brand of small Texas cowman who, in the years to come, would own big spreads. They would look back in the years, as respected members of the country, and remember with grins, silent perhaps, how they had swung a long loop to get started. Their sons riding fine horses, their daughters going to college.

These nesters . . . who were fighting and rustling Harry Travers' giant T4 range.

And Jude realized then that he had made a bad mistake. He had come in when the range already was taken; where a man had to be either a cow hand or a rustler. Men like Travers already had gotten in on the ground floor. He'd played his part in loyalty to his boss, killing when he didn't want to kill. Fighting the wind and hail and sleet and rain and snow to insure that the T4 and the girl and wife and father in it remained in the big house.

But he was a cog in a wheel; he was nothing more. There was Nell's beautiful face, she who seemed to grow more lovely each day; she who quarrelled and fought with him at every opportunity. And there was Edwina too, the ex-dancehall singer who aroused such fire in him.

But it was the end, that Jude knew. The end of an era, a time of life, a period in which he had done his best to play his part. And now the thing was done. Harry Travers had given his best in a fight for survival, and was still fighting. So had Jude. But he remembered Blackie and the fact that the sheriff had warned him. This one—this seventh man down in death beneath his guns—would not be passed off

"What's the matter with you, Jude?" Mike demanded. "You got a funny look on your face. Oh, I know. I guess I don't blame you. What happened?"

Jude told them everything; what had happened; what Red had gasped out, perhaps unintentionally, as he lay dying; the setup over which Blackie was overlord.

The two line riders sat their horses in silence, listening. The ever present buzzards sailed in the sky. A breeze whispered through the mesquites; and off in the distance a cow bellowed, the bawl of her calf coming in answer.

"So that's how it is?" Mike gasped out, something that was almost disbelief on his face. "He hung Grady to shut his mouth, eh?"

"That's right."

"And all the time I thought he used his belt on himself. What are you going to do now?"

"Going in to the ranch and make a full report to Nute and Travers. I'm going to tell them everything. So I'm burning the breeze. You boys spread out and hunt every scab you can find. That brand on the cow I shot was healed but not enough. They were driven over. You boys scour this country and shoot every scab you see. If you don't this whole south range will be infected in a few months. You'll have

to dip every head wearing a T4 brand. Hit out!"

He was unaware that he was giving orders and that they were obeying. Jude went back to where his horse stood with reins trailing and caught it. He swung up and made the seven miles back to the ranch in good time.

He went directly to the horse corral and unsaddled. He saw no movement of life around the ranch. A rooster crowed in the chicken pens. A milk pen calf bawled. Smoke wisped up lazily from the dugout dining room. The late morning sun shone down, no breeze in the air.

The cream colored sorrel was in the corral, fresh and rested. Jude went in with his rope, saddled the sorrel and threw his reins up over the animal's neck. He swung aboard the short, blocky body and rode up to the house.

Mrs. Travers was on the porch above the kitchen, peeling a batch of potatoes and chatting with Jessie, who sat beside her.

Jude reined up, he didn't get down.

"Seen Nute or the boss around?" he asked.

"They rode off about eight this morning, Jude, They're down on the south range somewhere."

"Where's Miss Travers?"

"So you finally are getting interested in our daughter, are you, Jude? I'm glad. Nell's in town. She left about daylight. I think they're giving some kind of a reception for some woman who's going to have a baby. You know, gifts and all that."

"All right," Jude said.

HE REINED over and rode down across the flats. He crossed one of the small dams in the gully that he himself had built. He was disappointed at not seeing Nute and Travers and tell them what he had learned, what Red Tolliver had stated before he died. But it would have to wait. Things would have to shape themselves. He let the blocky bodied sorrel take its time and didn't get into town until after two o'clock that afternoon. He rode first to Edwina's store, but the woman who now was helping her said that she was out taking one of the afternoon rides in which she now indulged. Nell Travers was with her.

Jude left the sorrel in front of the dress shop and walked down the street. He saw two men, tensed, and then relaxed as he recognized the two Texas Rangers, Hardin and Renner. They came up and shook hands. A man, one of the nesters, leaned against a wall nearby. He eyed the trio with brittle eyes.

"Hello, puncher," Hardin, the younger, greeted quietly. "How's things been going?"

"All right, I guess. Seen Blackie around?"

They looked at him sharply. "You seem kind of nervous, son," Renner, the older man with the hard face, said. "Blackie's out of town. Oughta be back most any time now. We sorta want to talk to him too. Anything special you wanted to see him about?"

Quietly Jude told them everything. Everything from the beginning. He did it aware that the man leaning against the wall had sidled off down the street toward where his horse was racked, that Sol Martin stood in the doorway of his big store, hearing it all.

"So thet's how it is?" Hardin said softly, and pulled thoughtfully at his chin.

"That's how it is." Jude said.

"Going to submit to arrest on charges of killing this Red Tolliver?"

"No. It was justified. He was driving scabbed cattle over onto our range, and he fired the first shot. You can probably find the empty shell. I came in to call Blackie's hand. He warned me and I know what to expect."

"So it's going to be a shoot out?" Hardin asked. "He's a lawman, you know. That means the rangers will have to act."

"I know," Jude answered.

Hardin let some kind of a smile come over his usually taciturn face. He reached up into a shirt pocket and extracted a white paper that had been sticking out of the pocket. Renner spoke up. Renner, the older and an ex-outlaw.

"Son, we've hed our eye on you for a long time now. You've got the makings of a good Texas Ranger. Hardin here is a Captain in the service. He wrote a recommendation to Austin for you to come in with us. There's your commission and your badge."

Hardin had held out the paper in one hand. In the other was a metal badge. "They're yours, Gordon," he said smiling.

"We want you in the service."

Jude looked at them. Slowly he shook his head.

"There's two women involved. One of them was Blackie's girl, and he gave me orders to keep away from her. The other is one he's been trying to marry. He's told her that she ought to keep away from me too. Then there was Tolson, the puncher he shot that night he stampeded the trail herd. He had Tolson murdered. One of the nesters did it, just who I don't know and probably will never learn. But I was one of the outfit, and I still am."

"Loyalty," Hardin said, returning badge and paper to his shirt pocket. "This blind loyalty that cow punchers have for their outfits. That and women. I wish I knew how many men have been shot, imprisoned, and hanged for it. So it's going to be a shootout? You know what that means, of course?"

"Yes, I know," Jude nodded. "But it's got to be that way."

"He's fast, son," Renner said. "He might get you."

"It's still got to be that way," Jude said.

Hardin sighed. He glanced at the rack where their horses stood with rifles in the scabbard.

"Maybe we can get around it," he said to the older man. "Let's go over to Blackie's office and wait for him."

JUDE stood watching them as they crossed to the new red courthouse and disappeared through the tunnel-like entrance of the hallway running north and south. He was aware that Sol was frozen in the doorway of his store, his son beside him; that a murmur had gone up and down the street. It was about then that Blackie and the man who had been leaning against the wall entered town, riding past the old and now deserted sheriff's office. The other had caught him just a short distance out of town and told him everything he had overheard. Blackie knew. He was facing it. Jude saw the careless swing of his hands as he reined up and dropped to the ground in a single, lithe step. The other man hurriedly rode across to the north side of the square where men were watching.

Blackie came southward along the west side of the square, his boots making hard sounds on the dried boardwalk. He was as handsome as he had been that first day when he came out of a barber's chair in Abilene and went back to the gun shop with Jude to pick out the pistol that now lay in the sheath at Jude's right thigh.

Jude shook the gun in its sheath to loosen it and started moving toward him. He came to where Sol Martin stood in the doorway of his store, and suddenly Sol stepped out and threw his fat Jewish arms around him.

"No, no, boy!" he cried out. "No, no, Jude! Don't meet him. He'll kill you. Give me that gun, Jude, and I'll back you up with everything I've got. Don't do it, boy!"

Over in the courthouse office of the sheriff the two rangers stood looking through the west window. The ex-outlaw's left hand was on Hardin's shoulder, clenching it hard. They were watching . . . waiting.

"The kid's going down," Captain Hardin said. "He hasn't got a chance. But he wanted it that way. By God, what a Texas Ranger he would have made! Anyhow, it'll clinch this warrant I have for Blackie being owner of the Eight Cross. He thought the rangers had slid out and were asleep after Durton got killed. He thought I didn't see those rope marks on that rustler's wrists when we held the inquest. And now they're coming down the walk toward each other. That kid's just flung Sol Martin's hands off him and is moving on. If Blackie kills him we'll still have to serve this warrant. And if the kid should come out on top, we've got to run him down and bring him in for downing a lawman. Look—!"

"My money's on the kid," Renner whispered hoarsely.

Over on the boardwalk they had met, coming to a stop some thirty feet distant. The doors of the saloon separated them at a distance of fifteen feet on each side. The doors were noticeably bare of loungers. Blackie paused and the old smile came to his handsome face.

"Hello, pardner," he greeted. "I've been hearing things."

"They get around, I reckon," Jude said.

"So you got Red?"

"He talked a little before he died. I think I know now who rattled that slicker that night up in Kansas and shot Tolson when the rattler might have been afraid of who recognized him, but luckily didn't. I think I got a pretty good idea of why you

were so set on killing Harrison in Abilene —because you wanted to take over as head of the Nester Pool. I know who hung Grady that night in his cell, hitting him over the head with a gun to stun him before lashing his wrists and swinging him by his belt, and then pulling down on his boots to strangle him. I could have overlooked some of that, Blackie, but you told me to keep away from Edwina and you're trying to marry a girl like Nell. That's what I couldn't take."

"So you're in love with one of them?" sneered Blackie.

"Yes," Jude said. "I'm in love with one of them."

The window of Blackie's office was now up with two men peering through, listening. A half dozen horses at hitch racks switched flies with their tails, dozing lazily. The air was clear, clean. It was exploded by the crash of six shooters. Smoke from black powder roiled up around Jude's stomach as he thumbed shot after shot, for Blackie was down and still trying to fire. Jude took deliberate aim and killed him with a final shot.

He turned. His left arm had a hot branding iron running across it above the elbow while a stream of blood flowed down the skin and dripped from his wrist. He saw the cream sorrel up there a hundred yards away and broke to run. He went past Sol's store, shoving the gun back into its sheath, leaving a man down on the boardwalk. A man who wore a lawman's badge. The man lay on his face and blood was dripping from his shirt front, hitting the dry boards, and slithering off through the wide cracks. He had been shot once, squarely through the badge on his shirt front.

JUDE took his saddle in a bound, grabbing up the reins with his good arm. The face of a frightened woman looked out from Edwina's store. Some strange instinct caused her to cry out, "She an' Miss Nell ain't here. They went riding." He ignored her because there was no time. A few minutes before he could have been a lawman. In those few short minutes he had become a desperado. A man wanted by the law for killing a lawman. He had to get out fast, leaving behind the woman he so desperately loved, the woman he had loved all those long lonesome months.

He rowelled the now rested cream sorrel, biting at his bandana with his teeth and knotting it around his useless left arm. He swung westward, toward the open prairie, and the town and all that it had become to him fell behind. The sorrel's blocky body rocked beneath him as he finished cutting off the blood flow and looked back. He let the animal take its time; that much he had learned about working a cow horse. Now he saw the two riders far behind, the rangers after him, and he saw the two riders ahead too.

He came abreast of them, his left arm afire, bandaged, bloody. He pulled up.

"Jude, what's happened!" Edwina cried out.

He told her and Nell in terse sentences that took seconds. The two pursuing riders were coming hard.

"You killed Blackie?" Nell screamed. "You couldn't have! We were to have been married . . ."

He didn't hear the rest of it. He was looking at Edwina, at the golden hair and lovely face that always had done something to him. He remembered the farm girl in Kansas, now living with his father; and there were seven dead men down before his guns. He looked at the ex-dancehall singer, a few months older than himself.

"Jude, they're coming! *Go, go!*" she cried to him.

"I'm heading for Santa Fe, Mexico territory, first stop, then on into Arizona territory," he said and rode closer. "I guess I've always loved you, Edwina. It looks like goodbye."

"Jude, you can't! I love you, too! But I was Blackie's girl. I'm . . ."

"Meet me there. I'll wait for you."

"Jude, go, go, go! They're coming!"

"I'm waiting for an answer."

"You have it. Wait for me, darling. Oh, Jude, wait for me! Now run for it, *run!*"

He ran for it. Hardin and Renner were rowelling hard down across the flats. They went past the two women with long reins slashing down across the flanks of their fresh horses, burning the wind after the rider astride the cream sorrel with four white feet. They came to a rise and Hardin held up a hand.

"My horse seems to have got a limp," he grunted. "We never coulda caught him."

Renner said, "So's mine. He always was a short winded cuss anyhow," and the ex-

outlaw's eyes went to the shirt front of his superior. Hardin had taken a paper from his shirt pocket and was tearing it to bits. He took out the badge and looked at Renner, who reached a hand for it.

Renner said, "I'll betcha I can hit that prairie dog's hole with this," and tossed.

It was a good shot. The badge went rumbling into the bowels of the earth. Renner sat his horse, looking at the distant rider. Something strange was in his face.

"You damned old bloody outlaw," Hardin chuckled. "I'll bet that right this minute your heart's right out there with that desperado kid. I oughta shoot you."

Renner grinned back at him, his hard face softening. "He sure saved us a lot of trouble a second time, Jim. And I reckon the Texas Rangers allus oughta pay their debts."

Ahead of them Jude was still working the cream sorrel, throwing quick glances over his shoulder. He had confidence in the horse that once had thrown him so hard. It was the best of his string.

He turned in the saddle and the breeze struck his face, pushing the hatbrim up, and filling his soul with a strange kind of new happiness.

He bent to the fore and the cream sorrel levelled its neck out, lunging into the west . . . toward Santa Fe and a rendevous with a lovely, golden haired woman.

THE END

FUR KING

By CHARLES RECOUR

Chains aren't always made of steel or iron—Raw "moonshine" makes a stronger bond!

"KING of the Upper Missouri" was the title by which Kenneth McKenzie was known in those long-ago days of the West when fur-trading was the principal industry. His realm was a wide area surrounding the junction of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers; his subjects were the Indians who brought him furs; his power was alcohol.

McKenzie was the representative of an eastern fur company which rewarded him according to the profits which he was able to make. He established his trading fort in a territory which had previously been drawn upon by the Hudson Bay Company further to the north. By means of his managerial ability, his personal popularity, and chiefly by his astute and clever system of dispensing whiskey to the Indians, he became the most successful trader on the frontier. He piled up a fortune for himself, and made millions for his company.

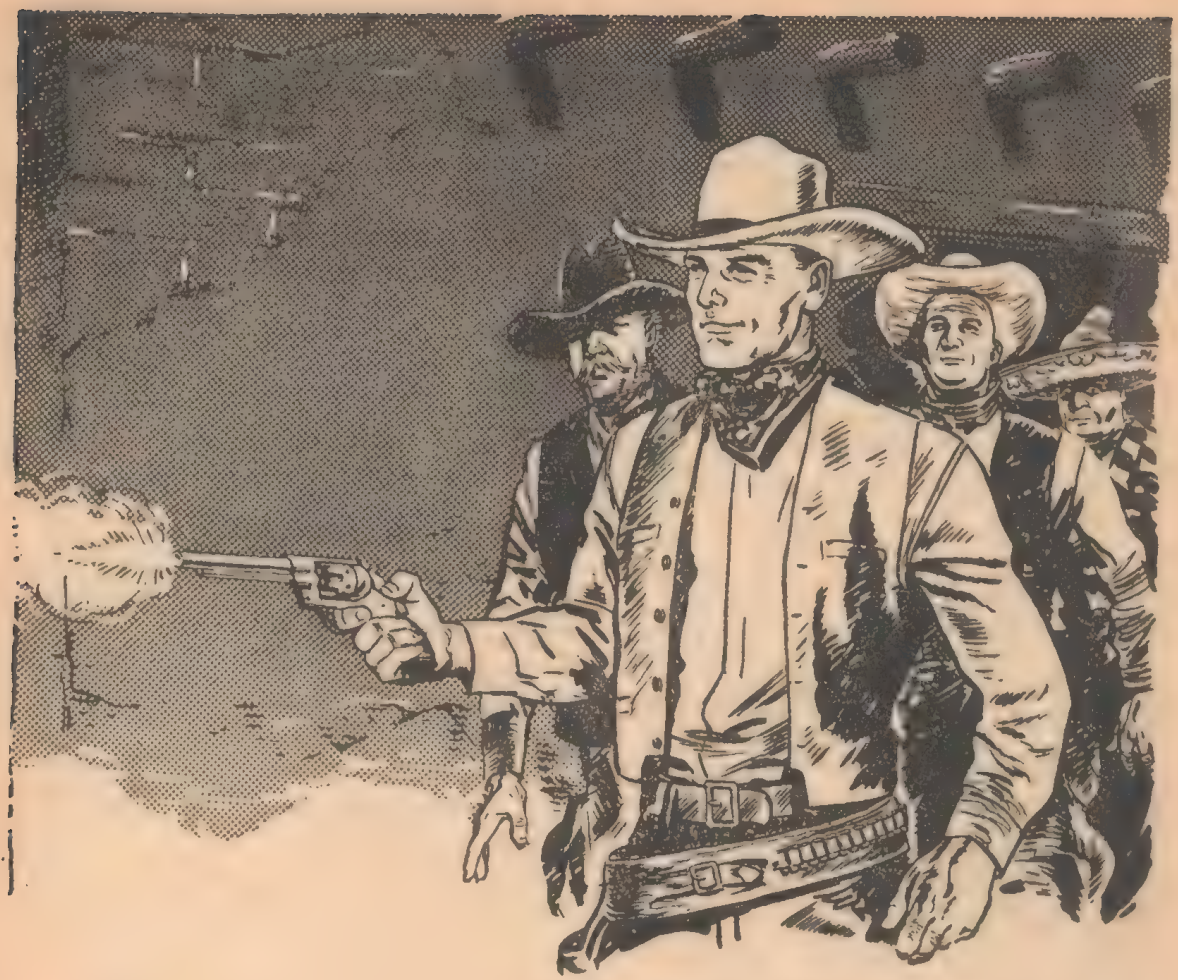
He had beads and calico, tobacco and rifles to trade for the valuable mink and beaver and otter furs, but those items became of secondary importance to the Indians, compared to the delights of raw whiskey.

Selling alcohol to the Indians was against the law, but it was only rarely that a United States government official came to this wilderness place, and McKenzie let his employer's urgent demand for profits be his law. If a government investigator headed his way, the "King" was always warned in time to hide the whiskey kegs and dismantle the still. For McKenzie had set up his own still, and manufactured the pale, fiery liquid freely.

He dispensed it carefully. Never enough to satiate the Indians, or make them murderously drunk. He gave them just enough to make them half-insane for more. The less satisfied they were, the harder the redskins would work to trap the fur-bearing animals which they could trade for more whiskey. And so McKenzie corralled the fur trade of a vast area, and considered it fitting and proper that he should be called "King of the Upper Missouri".

* * *

Cameron's shot smashed into Yager's arm, spinning the gun from his hand



BIG MAN

by Guy Archette

Cameron wasn't a big man, but he knew how to handle a six-gun, that great old equalizer!

TEN minutes after he had taken up his stand diagonally across the street from the barber shop, Cameron saw Duke Yager emerge. Casually, Cameron made certain that his holstered .44 hung just so. All the other details had previously been attended to. The gun had been cleaned, oiled, and loaded. It would do the job meant for it.

Cameron straightened up. He seemed tall suddenly, and it wasn't due entirely to the boots with specially built-up heels and the tall-crowned, white Stet-

son, which he wore to make up for his lack of height. The boyishness went from his angular, brown face. Something hard and cold and merciless came into it. His face became a man's face—and that man a stranger.

Cameron started across the street, moving steadily and deliberately toward Duke Yager.

On both sides of Pine Junction's main thoroughfare little knots of people watched tensely. They had seen Cameron waiting, and knowing what they did of him, they had become silently fascinated spectators. Now there was something of dread in their eyes as they saw Cameron close in on his victim.

Physically, Cameron was a little man. Nobody could have been more acutely aware of this fact than himself. But there was a curious respect in the glances he drew. And he was aware of this also. In another way, then, he was a big man, and the knowledge filled him with the sensation of power and importance he had always craved.

Yager reached the edge of the board sidewalk and stepped down to the street. In the next instant he saw Cameron approaching. He stopped abruptly, and his burly figure stiffened. His hand crept toward his holstered gun, then froze. A play of expression raced across his freshly-shaven, blocky features—alarm, fear, and then a sullen, trapped anger.

A dozen feet away, Cameron came to a stop. He said quietly, "I told you to clear out, Yager."

"Who do you think you are?" the other demanded. "You ain't got no right to order me around."

Cameron's voice remained quiet, though a cold edge crept into it. "I came to this town with a job to do, Yager. That job was to run out Blackie Stroud and his gang. I did it—but the job isn't over yet. I found out that you were a friend of Stroud's. So you're going to get out, too—or get what Stroud got."

"Blackie Stroud had a lot of friends," Yager said defensively. "I wasn't the only one."

"But you're just about the only one who could make trouble like Stroud was doing. I know all about you, Yager. I know every time there's a lynching or some other kind of hell-raising, you're always mixed up in it. I'm not going to take any chances with you. When I do a job, I do it all the way. That means you've got to clear out."

"You . . . you just ain't got no right," Yager argued, desperately seeking some avenue of escape.

Cameron slapped his holster lightly. "This is all the right I need. Don't forget I got called in to get rid of Blackie Stroud. Everybody liked my work fine. I guess that gives me the right to finish what I started out to do."

"But you ain't the town marshal. Nobody can tell me to clear out, unless it's Marshal Perkins."

Cameron shook his head slowly. "That's just why I was sent for in the first place. Perkins couldn't do anything against Stroud—claimed there wasn't any proof. Most likely he'd say the same thing about you. But proof isn't what I need. If I know, that's enough."

CAMERON made a brief, curt gesture. "I don't aim to do any more talking, Yager. I told you to clear out, and I gave you enough time. Now you're going to do it—or go for your gun."

Yager moistened his heavy lips, his deep-set, small eyes darting over the onlookers as though in search of help. The fingers of his right hand, held stiffly away from his gun, twitched and curled nervously. He moved as if intending

to walk away—and then, sudden rage surging into his face, he whirled back to Cameron, his hand flashing toward his holster.

Cameron moved very swiftly and very smoothly, with a cool, machine-like precision. He had long ago planned and prepared for this moment. Years before, in fact. As a youngster, other boys had constantly taken advantage of his small stature to tease and bully him. He had fought stubbornly, desperately, but fists often weren't enough. He had come to realize that he would never be respected or admired until he made himself superior in some way. His chance had arrived when he grew old enough to wear a gun. A gun was not only a means of protection; it was also an "equalizer," something that made a small man as dangerous as a big one.

Cameron had spent long hours in practice at drawing his gun and in shooting at all sorts of targets under widely different conditions. He had painstakingly learned the little gunfighter's tricks that often meant the difference between life and death. He had adapted each bit of knowledge to his own methods, and the result, combined with an inherent quickness of mind and eye, was a blurred rapidity of draw and an uncanny accuracy of aim that few could equal.

His efforts had won him the respect and admiration he wanted. He had developed an enviable reputation as a gunfighter, and it was this reputation that had led to his being called upon to run out Blackie Stroud after all other attempts had failed. Stroud, however, had taken a long chance—and had gone down under Cameron's blazing guns. Those of his gang remaining had wisely decided to leave Pine Junction.

Now Cameron faced Duke Yager, who was the only link with the Stroud gang left.

Cameron's gun seemed to leap into his hand as though possessing a life of its own. He fired an instant ahead of Yager. His bullet smashed into the other's arm, making his shot go wild. Cameron wasn't shooting to kill, something he seldom did. He was shooting to punish. Yager's life would be spared—but Yager had been warned, and he hadn't heeded the warning. Therefore, Cameron had told himself grimly, Yager would have to pay.

Again Cameron fired. His second bullet struck Yager high in the shoulder, spinning him half around. His third bullet grazed Yager's ear. His fourth knocked the man's hat into the dusty street.

Yager stood swaying, his features dazed and filled with pain. All the fight had left him. He looked sick and cowed.

Cameron gestured with his gun. "Clear out, Yager. I'll give you enough time to get patched up, then hit the trail. If you ever show your face in Pine Junction again, you'll know what to expect."

Yager said nothing. He bent slowly to pick up his fallen hat and gun. Clutching them weakly, he stumbled off down the street.

CAMERON holstered his .44 and glanced at the groups of watching townsfolk. They would be grinning in approval, of course. There would be cheers and waves—acknowledgment of the fact that he was a big man in every way, respected, admired.

But there were no cheers or waves. The crowd was silent—hostile, Cameron realized in bewildered dismay. Under the impact of his eyes, the people were beginning to turn away and leave.

As Cameron stared, a girl pushed her way through the departing figures. She

was slim and dainty, with vivid blue eyes and shining light-brown hair that fell in tumbled curls about her slender shoulders.

Cameron recognized Stella Dixon immediately. A cold knot formed in his stomach as he saw that her pert, oval features were angry and scornful. His bewilderment grew. What was wrong with everyone all at once?

Stella Dixon was the reason Cameron had lingered behind in Pine Junction. She was also the reason why he had jumped at the foreman job offered him by her father, Frank Dixon, owner of the Square D. It was Frank Dixon, who as head of a citizen's committee, had sent for Cameron to run out the Stroud gang. Cameron had done that —and had become acquainted with Stella. They had gone riding together, and together they had attended dances and meetings. Cameron had come to feel confident that he had a strong edge on his most serious rival, Brad Murdock, tall, husky and handsome owner of the Bar M.

But now Stella's small face seemed filled with a scathing dislike. Sharp words rushed from her lips.

"What's the matter with you, Jeff Cameron? Don't you know when to stop? I know Dad asked for your help, but that doesn't give you any right to pick on everyone who ever had anything to do with Blackie Stroud!"

"Duke Yager was a trouble-maker," Cameron protested. "He was a friend of Stroud's, and that means he'd be a friend of any other ornery maverick who came along. I couldn't take chances with him."

"Duke Yager wasn't any worse than a dozen other men in town," Stella snapped. "The way you shot him up was downright mean. It . . . why, it was the most hard-hearted thing I've ever seen!"

"I didn't kill him," Cameron said doggedly. "Anyway, Stella, I don't see why you should bother yourself about Yager."

"It isn't just Duke Yager. There's the other men you chased out of town just because they were friends of Blackie Stroud. People are getting tired of it, but they're afraid to say anything. The trouble with you, Jeff Cameron, is that you don't know when to quit. You want people to keep clapping their hands for you. It looks like you're nothing but a glory-hunter."

Cameron started to blurt a defense, but a feeling almost like sickness surged over him. Abruptly, devastatingly, he realized that Stella was right. He *was* a glory-hunter. He had allowed his desire for the praises of the crowd to carry him too far.

STELLA went on in a rush, her blue eyes misted with tears. "And not only that, Jeff Cameron, it looks like you're a bully as well. You're taking advantage of the fact that you can use a gun faster than other men. If it wasn't for that, I don't think you'd be so sure of yourself. You . . . you're *hiding* behind your gun, that's what you're doing! And I'm glad I found out in time!"

With a final glare, the girl whirled and hurried away down the street. Cameron numbly watched her go, his thoughts whirling in confusion. He was only dimly aware of it when another figure appeared before him. After a moment he recognized the long, leathery face of Marshal Jeb Perkins.

Perkins seemed uncomfortable. He was a tall, bony man, his clothes baggy and wrinkled. A huge gob of chewing tobacco bulged one of his whisker-studded cheeks. He said hesitantly:

"You got to cut out your fightin', Jeff. Folks is startin' to complain

about it. Ain't none of them liked Yager, but they're sort of gettin' worried you'll commence pickin' on law-abidin' citizens. Next time you jump somebody with no call 'cept what you think, I reckon I'll have to run you in."

Cameron stared at the marshal dazedly, the last fragments of his world crashing about him. Perkins shifted his gob of chewing tobacco, blinked a moment, then turned and ambled off in the direction of the town jail, shaking his bony head.

Cameron finally roused into motion. He walked slowly down the street, his eyes on the ground. Big man, he thought with bitter irony. He had been wrong. Bully! Glory-hunter! That was what people thought of him.

A couple of horsemen cantered past, swerving to avoid hitting Cameron, and staring at him curiously as they went by. Then a heavy wagon approached. The driver had to shout before Cameron awoke fully to where he was and moved out of the way.

Nothing mattered, Cameron told himself. His entire scheme of things had crashed into ruins. People no longer trusted or admired him. The only girl who had ever mattered held him in contempt. And this because he had done what he had thought was clearly his duty.

Reaching the hitchrack in front of the Frontier Hotel, where he had left his horse, Cameron mounted leadenly. As he was about to jerk at the reins, he heard a familiar voice call his name. He turned to see Zack Beech ride up. Beech was red-headed and chubby, with freckled features that were usually widened in an impish grin. The grin was absent now.

"Where's Miss Dixon?" Beech asked Cameron.

"Guess she rode the buckboard home by herself," Cameron said, shrugging dully. He glanced at the other. "Hear what happened?"

"Just a few minutes ago." Beech said nothing more immediately. He followed as Cameron urged his mount into motion. He worked for the Square D also, and in their duties together, he and Cameron had become firm friends. They had accompanied Stella Dixon into town earlier that day, to pick up mail and a few needed supplies.

The two rode silently out of town. At last, on the road leading toward the Square D, Beach glanced at Cameron and shook his head in sympathy.

"It was a rotten thing to happen, Jeff."

"What? Me shooting Yager?"

"No. I mean everything that happened after that. Far as I'm concerned, Yager had it coming to him. He was always mixed up in some kind of devilment—foxy like, so you couldn't catch him at it. I can't figure out why folks should stick up for him."

"They weren't sticking up for him exactly. I know that now. It's what you call the principle of the thing."

"I see what you mean," Beech said. He hesitated a moment. "Jeff, is Miss Dixon sore at you?"

"Yeah." Cameron briefly explained the reasons that had led Stella Dixon to ride back to the ranch alone.

BEECH shook his head. "Soon as Brad Murdock hears about it, he'll be hanging around the ranch again. Murdock's always been sweet on Miss Dixon, but you had him cut off for a while. He'll jump at his chances now."

Cameron scowled at the picture that Beech's words formed in his mind. It was true, he realized. And the fact that he didn't like the good-looking owner of the Bar M in no way helped matters. There had always seemed to be something too smooth and artificial

about Murdock.

"What do you figure on doing about what happened, Jeff?" Beech asked after another silence.

"I almost feel like packing up and hitting the trail," Cameron said.

"Heck no, Jeff!" Beech cried in swift protest.

"I said almost," Cameron reminded. "I don't quit easy, Zack, and I'm going to see this thing through. You know, I think folks are right in a way. I guess I was stretching my rope a little too far —even if I was right about Yager."

Beech's impish grin flashed. "That's the stuff, Jeff!"

Cameron felt his burdens lift a trifle. He'd walk easy for a while. He'd show Stella and the others that he really wasn't a bully or a glory-hunter. And by weathering the storm of disapproval, he'd show that he really was a big man after all.

A short time later, Cameron and Beech were on Square D land, riding toward the ranch buildings. The Square D was a large ranch, attractive, well-managed, and more prosperous than most. Cameron had enjoyed working for Frank Dixon, though with the opportunity to be near Stella, he hadn't thought of it as work. But there would be a difference now, Cameron thought somberly.

He was unsaddling his horse at the corral when he noticed Frank Dixon approaching from the direction of the ranch house. Dixon was elderly, though his wiry form was still straight and quick. He had thick white hair and eyes as blue as Stella's own. The years had seamed and weathered his features, emphasizing the imprints of kindliness and warmth which Cameron had found so characteristic of him.

Seeing that he had been observed, Dixon gestured to Cameron. "Like to talk to you a minute, Jeff."

Cameron strode over, filled with uneasy foreboding. But this began to fade when Dixon dropped an arm about his shoulders and spoke quietly and intensively.

"Stella told me about you shooting Duke Yager, Jeff. She was kind of worked up about it, feeling you did wrong. Yager's a polecat and deserved what he got, but in a way Stella's right. Besides, it seems that a lot of folks in town feel like she does. So I reckon it'd be a good idea if you sort of walked soft from now on. What do you say, Jeff?"

Cameron nodded. "I've been thinking about it, and I'm ready to admit I made a mistake. I was only trying to finish what I started, but I guess I was in too much of a hurry."

"Good boy!" Dixon approved. "I know I can count on you, Jeff. I've been hoping I didn't make a mistake when I sent for you to come to Pine Junction, and then hired you to ramrod for me."

Cameron said hesitantly, "Does Stella sound . . . well, like she was mad at me for good?"

The rancher looked away. "She's pretty headstrong. Maybe that's what comes of not having a mother to bring her up. But maybe things will blow over."

Cameron felt sick. The thought of losing Stella permanently was unbearable.

Yet Dixon's behavior seemed to point to that.

The ranchcer patted Cameron's arm uncomfortably. "There's nothing I can do, Jeff, but I'll be hoping for the best. I never had a son, and I was kind of figuring on . . . well . . . " Dixon shrugged and let his voice trail off. "Just take things slow and easy, Jeff." With a final pat, he turned and strode back to the ranch house.

CAMERON gazed after him for a long moment, his thoughts gray and heavy. Then he started for the bunkhouse, his steps slow and plodding.

After supper that evening, Cameron strode outside to take a short walk and smoke a cigarette before turning in. The sun was sinking behind distant hills on the horizon, drawing a glorious blanket of rose and gold clouds in its wake. Long shadows were spreading over the land, and Cameron didn't notice the two figures beneath a group of pines until one of them spoke.

"Have you added spying on me to your list of bad habits, Jeff Cameron?" It was Stella's voice, coldly sarcastic.

Cameron became aware of her, then. Her companion was a man, tall and husky. Murdock, Cameron knew instinctively.

The owner of the Bar M added his voice to the girl's. "Cameron, eh? I want a word with you, mister."

Cameron nodded faintly and stood quietly motionless, waiting as the other strode toward him. Murdock had sandy hair and was good-looking in a bluff, rugged way. He looked well-dressed in a striped brown suit that had evidently been tailored in the East.

Murdock towered over Cameron as he came to a stop several feet away. "I heard what happened in town today, Cameron."

A retort that it was none of Murdock's business rushed to Cameron's lips, but he forced it back. He nodded again and remained silent. He knew Stella was watching intently, and he didn't want to say or do anything that would add to her dislike for him.

Murdock went on, "You shot up Duke Yager and ordered him to get out of town, Cameron. I don't like that, and I'll tell you why. Duke Yager's working for me."

"Working for you!" Cameron said in surprise. As far as he had known, Yager had no apparent means of support and seemed just to loaf about in town, slyly inserting his thick fingers into whatever trouble might be brewing.

"What's wrong with that?" Murdock demanded.

"I didn't say anything was wrong with it," Cameron replied with deliberate mildness.

"You sounded like it was a dirty trick of some kind."

"Maybe my voice isn't in shape today."

Murdock scowled. "Well, listen, Cameron, Duke Yager isn't going to leave town, and furthermore, I want you to leave him alone. I hired him a couple of days ago, to do odd jobs for me. He was taking care of some business in town for me when you jumped him."

Cameron maintained his silence with difficulty. He sensed that Murdock was taking advantage of the situation in Pine Junction that had arisen over the shooting of Duke Yager. The rancher obviously knew that Cameron would now avoid doing anything which would make the situation worse. And there was Stella. Most likely Murdock knew also that Cameron would sidestep actions that would serve to widen the rift between himself and the girl.

CAMERON raged inwardly. It all boiled down to the fact that his hands were very thoroughly tied. He couldn't revenge himself for Murdock's insultingly domineering manner, by challenging the man to draw, without at the same time exchanging the frying pan for the fire.

Thumbs looped in the pockets of his stylish vest, Murdock rocked back

on his heels. "I guess we understand each other, Cameron."

"I guess we do," Cameron said softly.

"One thing more," Murdock said. "I don't like to have people spying on me. And neither does Miss Dixon."

Cameron made no anwer. He met Murdock's eyes in a long steady look of such burning intensity that the rancher involuntarily glanced away. Then, blindly, Cameron whirled and stalked back toward the bunkhouse, blood roaring and pounding in his ears. He didn't dare to remain another instant. He knew he might lose control and tear into Murdock like a maddened beast.

Cameron saw little of Stella after that. As the days passed, he felt their separation with growing sharpness. He found himself remembering the mornings they had ridden together and the evenings when they had walked along the road, or had spent deep in talk on the steps of the ranch house. These recollections came to him with a sensation of pain that was all the more acute because of his increasing certainty that he would never spend another minute with Stella again.

For the girl was seeing more and more of Brad Murdock. Now it was with Murdock that she went riding and walking, with Murdock that she attended the occasional dances, parties, and meetings. And she seemed to be enjoying herself. Often Cameron heard her laughter tinkle from the ranch house, and the sound of it brought a ghostly parade of old memories that moved softly and yet with a deep hurting through his mind.

Frequently Cameron encountered Murdock in his duties about the ranch. Murdock seemed to have a great deal of spare time, and he spent the major part of it at the Square D. His face, when he managed to catch Cameron's glance, was smug, assured, and mocking. His grin hinted of things that brought a red mist of fury to Cameron's eyes.

What made matters all the more tormenting was that there was nothing Cameron could do. An attack on Murdock would only serve to confirm the belief that Cameron possessed a mean, ugly nature, which seemed to be held by Stella and the people of Pine Junction.

Dixon and Beech apparently understood Cameron's feelings. Again and again they cautioned him to keep his head. But presently Beech grew silent on that score. He performed Cameron's business duties in town now, since Cameron preferred to remain away from the scene of his downfall, and he had learned things that had changed his outlook.

One morning Cameron and Beech were on a distant part of the ranch, hunting for strays. Alone, and with Beech's presence lending comfort, Cameron's turbulent emotions broke their restraining walls.

"Damn Murdock!" he spat. "Zack, I tell you I can't stand any more of the looks Murdock's been giving me. I know part of the way I feel is because he's keeping steady company with Stella—but, damn it, Zack, he doesn't have to keep looking at me like a cat that just ate a barrelful of mice. One of these days—and plenty soon—I'm going to make him draw. I know it'll end everything for me, but with Murdock full of lead, I'll be glad to foot the bill."

Beech looked intently into the distance. He said slowly, "Maybe it's a good idea at that, Jeff."

Cameron stared. "Huh! What's got into you? All along you've been telling me to keep my horns in."

"I know," Beech said. "But I've

been hearing things in town that have changed my mind."

"What sort of things?" Cameron demanded swiftly. "About Murdock?"

"About you, Jeff. Said by Murdock. I know it'll make a worse mess to tell you about it, but I wouldn't be a real friend if I tried to keep it back. This is something you ought to know, Jeff. And anyhow, I reckon you'd find out sooner or later."

"What do you mean? Tell me, Zack!"

"Well, Murdock's been going around saying you've turned yellow. He claims he's got you buffaloed and eating out of his hand. And, Jeff, he says he told you to keep out of town, which is why you haven't been showing your face."

"He said that?" Cameron spoke softly, musingly.

And he smiled.

SEEING that smile, Beech looked away with a shudder.

There was a silence. The horses were treading their way among scattered rocks at the foot of a line of low hills. From the hills the land sloped gently into a long, narrow valley, studded with brush and pines. The sky above was cloudless and very blue. A cool breeze drifted in vagrant gusts from the north.

Beech said finally, "Jeff, I've been thinking about Murdock saying those things, and it doesn't make sense somehow. Murdock has brains enough to know his tongue will get him into serious trouble. The only explanation seems to be that he *wants* you to jump him."

"Maybe he's tired of living," Cameron said darkly.

"Maybe he's tired of something else, Jeff."

"I don't savvy."

"Maybe he's tired of waiting for Miss Dixon to make up her mind about marrying him. He's been asking her, you see. There's some gossip about it in town. And it seems like Miss Dixon's been putting him off."

Beech paused a moment, and Cameron watched him, tense and impatient. It last Beech said:

"Now why should she keep putting Murdock off, Jeff? Because there's somebody else she's interested in, that's why. Somebody who's been mighty quiet lately, and seems to have turned over a new leaf."

Cameron drew in his breath sharply. In his eyes was a reflection of the incredulous hope that blazed into his mind.

"Of course, Murdock would know why Miss Dixon's been giving him the run-around. And he would want to do something to set her against you permanent. That's why he's telling lies about you. So you'll jump him. I wouldn't put it past Murdock to fix the whole thing up, so he'll come out of it with a whole skin when you do."

That was true enough, Cameron knew. Murdock had set a clever trap, and without Zack Beech's cool head, Cameron might have rushed blindly into it.

"Well?" Beach said after a short silence. "Still want to make Murdock draw against you, Jeff?"

"No," Cameron said gently. "Not now, Zack. I see—"

Cameron broke off as something droned and stirred air past his chin. A moment later the flat, distant report of a rifle sounded on the air.

"Down, Zack!" Cameron shouted. "Somebody's shooting at us from the hills."

Flattening himself in the saddle, Cameron spurred his horse into wild flight, making himself as difficult a tar-

get as possible. Beech did likewise, and for several seconds that seemed individual, nightmarish eternities, they jolted over the rough ground, while whining bits of leaden death hungrily sought their lives.

CAMERON'S .44 was in his hand, and as he moved, his slitted eyes raked the brush covering the hill slopes. He caught the faint glitter of sunlight on a rifle barrel. In almost the same instant, he aimed and fired. He couldn't tell whether he had scored a hit, but the rifle went silent.

"He's up there, Zack!" Cameron pointed briefly with his gun, craning around to look at Beech. "Split. We'll go after him. I'll take one side, you the other."

Beech nodded without hesitating. He had his own gun in his hand. Now he reined his horse in the direction Cameron had indicated. Together they charged up the hill, firing tentative shots as they went.

The bushwhacker hadn't been hit, Cameron learned. The man snapped one more shot at him before he evidently decided that the situation was becoming too warm for comfort. Cameron saw a flash of color among the brush, and a moment later a man's figure darted over the crest of the hill.

"Hurry, Zack!" Cameron called. "He's running for it!"

A moment later Cameron crested the hill and started down the other side. His quarry had reached the bottom and was vaulting into the saddle of a waiting horse. For an instant the man stared up at Cameron. Though small with distance, the other's bearded, dark features, strained and desperate, sent a shock of recognition through Cameron. He knew the man who had tried to kill him. Mormon Cole!

Mormon Cole had been a member of the Stroud gang.

And then, even as Cameron stared numbly, the fugitive dug frantic spurs into his horse and was riding madly away amid a small cloud of dust and scattered pebbles.

Belatedly, Cameron raised his gun to fire. The hammer clicked on an empty shell.

Beech came pounding up to Cameron, reining in his mount sharply. "Jeff—he's getting away!"

Cameron muttered, "That was Mormon Cole, Zack."

Surprise flared into Beech's chubby features. "Mormon Cole! Why, Jeff, he was one of the Stroud gang. I thought those left of the gang were clean out of the country."

"So did I," Cameron said. "But it looks like we were wrong. Come on, Zack!"

Cameron and Beech resumed the pursuit, but Cole, riding with reckless speed, was already a good distance away. He increased the distance rapidly, and then Cameron and Beech lost sight of him.

Cameron finally pulled his horse to a stop. "It's no use, Zack. We'd have to follow his trail now, and he'd be getting farther away all the time. He'll keep running as long as he thinks we're after him."

Beech nodded reluctantly, and then turned to follow as Cameron started to retrace the path they had taken in their pursuit of Cole.

"It looks like Cole was laying for you, Jeff," Beech said presently. "That must mean he has a hideout somewhere around here. And I'll bet the others are with him. The Stroud gang always stuck together."

"You may be right," Cameron returned. "If Cole and the others do have a hideout around here, I'd certainly like to know where it is."

BEECH slapped his plump thigh in sudden excitement. "Why not send out old Pete Van Horn, the handyman at the ranch? Pete used to be a cavalry scout and can read sign like a book. He'll track down Cole if anybody can."

Cameron nodded, his face cold. "Old Pete's as good as hunting sign right now!"

Later, back at the bunkhouse, Cameron and Beech sought out Van Horn and explained what they wanted done. The old ex-scout was eager. He was a small, wizened man, with wrinkled, leathery features that had seen more than sixty years of sun and wind. Cameron described the location where the attempt on his life had taken place, and Van Horn promised to set out the very first thing in the morning.

"If they're on this ol' earth, I'll find 'em!" Van Horn said in his thin, piping voice.

Three days passed while Van Horn searched. In the afternoon of the third day a rider from Pine Junction came thundering into the Square D with news that created immediate and vast interest. The bank in town had been robbed of close to thirty-thousand dollars. And not only that—one of the robbers had been recognized, his mask having slipped during the hold-up.

Numerous witnesses had identified the man as Mormon Cole.

And then, while Cameron, Beech, and the other men at the Square D bunkhouse were still in a stir of excitement over the report, old Pete Van Horn hurried in, his wrinkled face split by a broad grin of triumph.

"I found the hideout!" he announced breathlessly to Cameron. "Told you I would!"

Cameron caught the old man's arm eagerly. "Where, Pete? Tell me—quick!"

"Guess, son. Sorry I got to prod you—but this is good."

Cameron tried several quick guesses, failing with each of them. Finally he shook Van Horn impatiently.

"Cuss you, Pete, out with it! Where is the hideout, anyway?"

"On the Bar M!" Van Horn said. "There's a big ravine on Bar M land, up near Spook Pass, and at one end of the ravine is a small cabin. The men I tracked are in that cabin."

For a moment Cameron was stunned. Then he fell to pacing the floor feverishly. The bunkhouse was in an uproar. Almost all the Square D punchers were present, and they had known both that Van Horn had been tracking Mormon Cole, and the Cole and a group of henchmen had robbed the bank in Pine Junction that very afternoon.

At last Cameron whirled back to Van Horn. "Pete, are you sure about all this—absolutely sure?"

"Sure?" Van Horn echoed indignantly. "Why, dagnab it, I'm positive! I saw Mormon Cole go into the cabin with my own eyes. This afternoon he and a bunch of others came ridin' in from somewhere, talkin' and laughin' like they just struck it rich."

"They did," Cameron said grimly. "Cole and the others robbed the bank."

"And we know just where they are!" Beech put in, while Van Horn gaped in surprise. "We can grab them all before they can even think about making plans for a getaway. What are we waiting for?"

The question was taken up by almost all the other men in the bunkhouse. They were eager to grasp at the chance of adventure and excitement.

CAMERON saw at once that it would be difficult if not actually

impossible to stop them. The only thing left to do was to work out a plan that would insure reasonable chances of success.

At Cameron's suggestion, Van Horn drew a rough map of the ravine and cabin. A plan of attack was quickly worked out, and men were assigned to accomplish the various details of it. Then weapons were hurriedly though thoroughly examined, ammunition and other supplies gathered, and finally the men poured from the bunkhouse to saddle up.

Frank Dixon might have objected had he been present to witness the proceedings, but he had left with Stella a few hours before, to attend a dance in Pine Junction. Cameron knew that Stella's presence at the dance meant that Murdock would also be there.

But he didnt' let that concern him now. There was more serious business at hand. Men would die if anything went wrong.

A short time later Cameron was leading his unofficial posse of Square D punchers toward Spook Pass.

It was early evening now, and dark, but a three-quarter moon was coming up over the hills. Cameron and the others made good time. The men had grown quiet. Their impulsiveness had faded, and though enthusiasm still remained with them, it was more grim and determined.

Near Spook Pass, Cameron separated the men, reminding each of their assigned task. As stealthily as drifting shadows, they moved into the ravine. One by one, they then silently dismounted and crept toward the cabin on foot. They were in effect a circle of human flesh backed by ready guns, a circle that drew slowly tighter.

The distance separating them from the cabin lessened. Inside the building a guitar twanged, and a man's baritone lifted in a discordant snatch of song. Another man laughed raucously, and a mutter of voices followed.

A part of Cameron began to relax. No guards had thus far been encountered. It seemed that Mormon Cole and the others had been too confident of the secrecy of their hideaway to post guards. It was a mistake they would regret.

Cameron now put the second phase of his plan into action. He waved a white handkerchief in a pre-arranged signal. Word was passed around quietly to make certain that every man knew what was taking place.

The circle had become stationary. The rest was up to Cameron, Beech, and two other men. To them fell the most dangerous part of the entire plan. They were to creep directly up to the cabin, covering the men inside from windows and door. If anything went wrong, they were to fall flat along the outside walls, while their companions behind them sent a covering barrage of shots into the cabin, keeping the robbers at bay. Then Cameron and his group were to set fire to the cabin, carrying kerosene-soaked rags for this purpose.

THAT never became necessary, however. Cameron and the others reached the cabin without difficulty. And as Cameron kicked in the door, Beech and the two accompanying punchers thrust their guns through the glass of the windows.

Mormon Cole was drinking from a jug. He dropped it in dismayed surprise as Cameron burst into the room. Then, frantically, his hand darted for the gun in his belt.

Cameron shot Cole through the shoulder. Warning shots from the windows halted the others in their laggard efforts to duplicate the action.

Cole and the others robbed the bank in town and made a quick get-away

Among them was Duke Yager. It developed later that Yager had been in on the robbery, his bandaged arm and shoulder concealed in a muffling coat.

"Reach for the ceiling!" Cameron snapped. "You're all covered. Try anything and you die."

None of the captives attempted resistance. And as hands rose slowly into the air, Cameron knew it was over.

Over, that is, except for one final thing.

The robbers were each bound securely. Then, with the bank loot safely in Beech's hands, Cameron prepared to leave.

"I'll leave it for you to get the gang into town, Zack," he told the other. "As for me, I'm on my way."

"But where are you going?" Beech demanded in perplexity.

"To town. But I'm in a hurry, Zack!"

Running back to where he had left his horse, Cameron leaped into the saddle and spurred the animal into a swift gallop toward Pine Junction.

The dance was being held at the Lodge Hall, Cameron found. The wail of a violin, rising over the wheezing of an accordion and the tinny clatter of a piano, greeted him as he strode inside. The large, paper-decorated, but otherwise plain room echoed to the stamping of feet as couples danced. Voices raised in laughter underscored the continuous murmur of conversation.

Cameron bought an admission ticket, but brushed unheedingly past as the cashier requested that he check his gun. The man attempted to follow him, then gave up for the moment as Cameron quickly lost himself in the crowd. His features set and cold, Cameron began searching.

The man he wanted to see was a tall, husky man, a man with sandy hair and a stylish suit.

Cameron found him within a few minutes.

Murdock was standing at one end of the hall with a group of friends. He held a half-empty glass of beer in one hand and was laughing heartily at a joke that had just been made. The merriment left his features when he saw Cameron.

The others saw Cameron, too, then. From Cameron and Murdock a sphere of silence formed and swelled and spread throughout the entire hall.

The fiddle scraped into sudden silence, and the accordion expired with a sharp wheeze. The piano clattered a moment longer, then it also went into silence.

"It's Jeff Cameron!" a whisper went up.

"Jeff Cameron's here!"

"There's going to be trouble—bad trouble!"

CAMERON smiled. "Here I am, Murdock. Jeff Cameron, the bully and glory-hunter. The man who's turned yellow. The man you buffaloed and made to eat out of your hand. The man you ordered to keep out of town. Well, I'm in town right now, Murdock. What are you going to do about it?"

"You . . . you're drunk," Murdock said. "And you're wearing a gun. Guns aren't allowed at this dance." The rancher looked over Cameron's head, as though seeking someone who would immediately remove Cameron for the offense of wearing a gun in the hall.

Nobody appeared.

The whispers had died. The heavy silence was broken by a woman's nervous giggle.

Cameron said, "Don't waste words, Murdock. Let's keep things to the point. I want to know if you admit

calling me yellow and having me eat out of your hand and telling me to keep out of town. I want to know, Murdock. Give me a straight answer."

Murdock glanced about him. He moistened his lips. "All right," he said abruptly, his voice loud in the stillness. "I admit it. And it's true!"

"Then it's also true that you're going to pay for lying," Cameron said softly.

"I'm not wearing a gun," Murdock said quickly. "Even if I was, everybody knows I wouldn't stand a chance against you. It would be outright murder."

Cameron shook his head. "I wouldn't take advantage of you, Murdock. I'm going to give you all the odds you want. I'm a bigger man than you are—and I'm going to prove it."

Cameron unbuckled his gunbelt and let it drop to the floor. He tossed his hat aside and unbuttoned his jacket. He said:

"We'll make it fists, Murdock. "Where'll you take your beating—here, or outside?"

There was a cry of sudden protest, and the figure of a girl rushed forward. Stella caught Cameron's arms.

"Jeff—no! You can't do this. It wouldn't be fair. Brad's bigger than you are."

"He isn't," Cameron said. "I'm going to prove that."

Stella's face twisted. "Jeff, are you out of your mind?"

Frank Dixon suddenly appeared. He said quietly, "You can't do this, Jeff. Murdock weighs over sixty pounds more than you, and he's about a foot taller. You wouldn't stand a chance against him in a fist fight."

"I'm willing to risk that," Cameron said.

A growing babble deepened into an uproar of voices in the hall. The crowd, excited by the prospects of a fight, was taking sides. It soon became apparent that there were more rooters for Cameron than for Murdock. But Murdock's cohorts were eagerly urging him on.

The rancher's mouth tightened vengefully. He nodded and began removing his coat. "We'll have it out here," he told Cameron.

"Brad!" Stella cried. "If you go through with this, I'm never going to have anything to do with you again!"

"This little rooster is asking for it," Murdock said. "And he is going to get it. I'm going to beat him to a pulp!"

THE yells of the crowd drowned out Stella's pleas. Dixon put his arm gently about her shoulders and drew her away, shaking his head sadly.

A space was quickly cleared in the middle of the hall. If Cameron's challenge had occurred anywhere but at the dance, the crowd would not have permitted it to be accepted by Murdock. But emotions were turbulent with whiskey and music and the activity of dancing. The crowd wanted excitement, novelty.

The crowd did not quite realize that it also wanted blood.

In the cleared circle, with faces ringing them like the yawning muzzles of hungry wolves, Cameron faced Murdock. A self-appointed referee took charge of the preliminary details. And then the signal was given for the fight to begin.

Murdock immediately rushed in, swinging his large right fist in a savage uppercut at Cameron's jaw. Cameron moved his head slightly, allowing the blow to pass without harm. His own right sank deep into Murdock's middle. But then the force of the rancher's charge and his own greater weight spun Cameron around, out of

balance. Cameron fell to one knee.

Murdock, however, had been dazed, even if slightly. He was unable to follow up his advantage at once. And by the time he had fully recovered, Cameron was once more on his feet, alert and ready.

Again and again, Murdock rushed, throwing his fists in futile blows at Cameron. Cameron dodged and ducked, whirled and danced. He was as elusive as a flame flickering among burning logs. Repeatedly, he escaped vicious blows that would have meant broken bones had they landed.

He knew he wouldn't be able to keep it up. But he didn't intend to wait too long.

Suddenly, seizing an opportunity, Cameron closed in on Murdock, wrapping his arms in a fierce embrace about the larger man. The crowd shrieked. Over the noise, Cameron hissed swift words into Murdock's ear.

"Mormon Cole . . . captured. And Yager. Back Beech and . . . and Square D riders bringing them to town. With bank money."

Murdock froze into rigidity, and Cameron spoke faster. "Zack Beech will tell. You were behind Stroud gang. You were hiding Mormon Cole and others on Bar M land. You planned the bank robbery with Cole. Yager spied out the details for the robbery."

"You lie!" Murdock husked.

"Ravine near Spook Pass," Cameron whispered, his strength draining. "Cabin in ravine. Cole thinks . . . you sold him out. He'll pull you in with him."

A moment longer Murdock remained rigid. Then he thrust Cameron away from him, knocking the smaller man to the floor. With a wild glance at the staring and now silent crowd, he suddenly lowered his head and charged recklessly into the packed bodies blocking his path to the door.

For a moment the throng resisted mindlessly. Then it opened to let him past.

Murdock dashed outside. A moment later the sound of departing hoofbeats arose.

Cameron didn't hear them. He found himself sitting on the floor, and Stella's arms were about his shoulders. Her tear-streaked face was anxious.

"Jeff! Are you hurt?"

"Some," Cameron said with an instinctive sagacity. "But it's all right, Stella."

"I'm sorry, Jeff," she said miserably. "I didn't really mean what I said to you that day. And I never really cared for Brad Murdock. He . . . he's a *bully!* I'm glad you beat him. I . . . I'm proud of you!"

Cameron almost missed that, for the crowd was yelling again, shouting in wild approval. The noise told him that he was a big man once more—this time in the only way that really mattered.

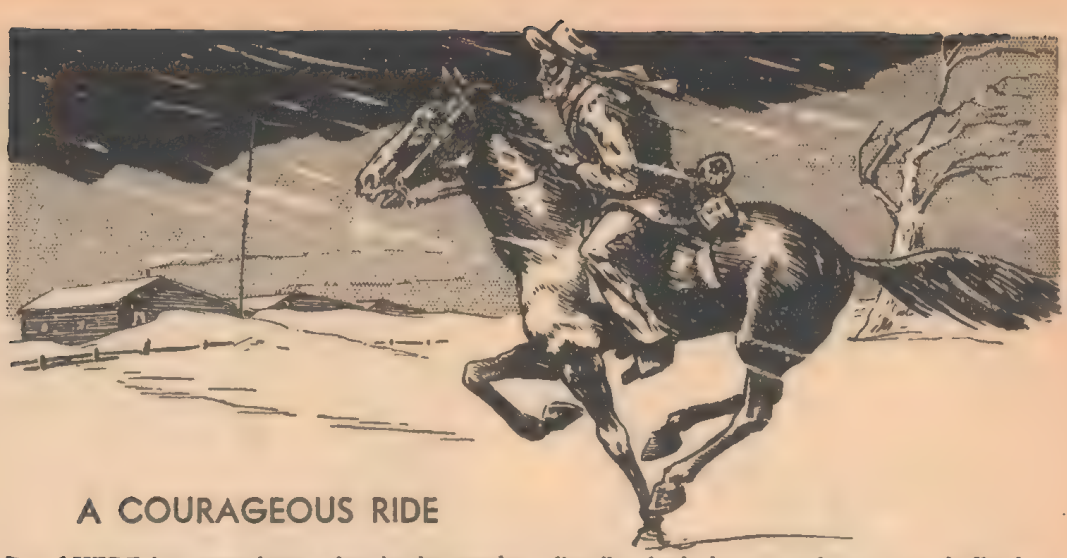
THE END

A LONG RIDE

ONE of the longest single runs ever made on the Pony Express, which operated through the West in the middle nineteenth century, was made by young Buffalo Bill Cody. High-spirited, gallant and dependable, he was one of the most popular riders of the pony route.

One day he arrived at the end of his run to find that the man authorized to carry the mail sack on from there was dead. Immediately then, unwilling that the tradition of speedy mail service via Pony Express should be broken, he mounted a fresh horse and rode the eighty-five miles to Rocky Ridge Station, where waited the man who was to ride the next relay.

He had ridden continuously for over three hundred miles, at a speed averaging fifteen miles an hour. —*by John Crail*



A COURAGEOUS RIDE

THERE has never been a feat in the annals of the West more extraordinary than that of Portugee Phillips in December, 1866. He braved hostile Indians, blinding snow, and sub-zero temperatures on a ride of well over two hundred miles, to save a garrison.

It was just after the famous Fetterman Massacre, in which Colonel Fetterman and his entire band of eighty men, while on a short expedition away from Fort Kearney, were ambushed and killed by Sioux Indians on the warpath. The commander of the fort, Colonel Carrington, realized that the Indians were in a dangerous mood, and that, shorthanded as it was, the fort was in great jeopardy.

Then came a great blizzard, and the soldiers rejoiced, in spite of the bitter cold, for the Indians would have to delay their attack. But as the snow piled higher and higher, it was soon evident that the storm might not be such a blessing after all. The Indians would soon be able to walk over the high-piled drifts right into the fort.

Shoveling began, and was carried on in relays, without intermission. The task was a frightful one, for the temperature had dropped to thirty below zero, and the snow whipped furiously at the freezing men.

The situation was serious. Carrington asked for a volunteer to go to Laramie for help. The men shook their heads in dismay. Even the experienced mountain men thought it would not be possible, however urgent the need. Then a civilian scout named John Phillips, called "Portugee," offered to go. He was a man whose reputation was not of the best, having been quarrelsome and somewhat untrustworthy. But apparently in him there was also unusual heroism, bravery and endurance, and dire emergency brought out these qualities.

The Colonel gave Phillips his own thoroughbred horse to ride. Phillips took a sack of oats for the horse and a few biscuits for himself.

To this day it is a marvel to the West that Phillips found his way to his destination. Ordinarily, both horses and men are inclined to travel in a circle during a blizzard. Phillips rode straight through the swirling darkness, and managed to keep his sense of direction. For the first few miles he was painfully alert for the Sioux, but apparently it had not occurred to them that anyone would be out in such a storm, and he encountered no one. When well away from the fort, he urged his horse into a gallop, and rode hard.

All that night and for two more days and nights he traveled, his hands, feet and face becoming more deeply frostbitten each hour. At Horse Shoe Creek, forty miles from Laramie, there was a telegraph station, and there he telegraphed to Laramie before riding on. For some reason, that telegram was never delivered.

It was the day before Christmas, 1866. Laramie in those days had become fairly civilized. It was out of the Indian fighting area, and was comfortable and safe. The officers and men of the garrison there had their wives with them. There was an officers' club, and the officers were giving a Christmas Eve Ball.

Into the midst of the festivities, the warmth, the dancing, the gaily dressed women, staggered a gaunt, frozen figure. Snow-covered, exhausted, he delivered his message. Then he collapsed. Outside the door, his commander's horse was dying, after an ordeal which was too much for the finest of animals. Phillips himself lay at death's door for many weeks. Two hundred and thirty-six miles they had come, over trackless winter wastes, traveling almost continually for three days and three nights.

Because of the heroic endurance of Portugee Phillips, reinforcements arrived at Fort Kearney in time to protect that important place from the Indians, and to save the lives of the remainder of the suffering garrison.

The Sioux found out who had done this to them, and they did not forgive nor forget Phillips. Six years afterwards they had an opportunity for revenge. They killed all his cattle, ruining him financially.

—by Pete Boggs

Black snarled, half senseless from the merciless slugging he was receiving from the ruffians

The PRICE OF A LEG

by John Di Silvestro

Black vowed that he'd be a preacher!—if the Lord would spare his leg—and he didn't break his vow!

WHIT BLACK was trapped. He instinctively crouched against the rough logging of the rude cabin on the outskirts of the booming, new Railroad town of Crown Town.

Black snarled, half senseless from the merciless slugging he had received at the hands of the five ruffians who were systematically, gleefully beating him to death.

"Who needs prayin' fer now?" said the cleanly shaven squat one.

They rushed forward with the suddenness of Prairie deviltry. Two of them grasping the arms of the tall, thin bible carrier and holding him for the blurring fists that battered the bloody one time gambler.

"Easy, Jack," Whit Black heard through the burning pain that made any voluntary motion impossible.

"All right, Pete, we leave him iffen you say so," were the last words Black heard before his final sense, that of hearing, left his crawling body.

He wanted to reach them. Tear into them with his teeth. He couldn't lift

his body or arms but he could push himself toward the jeering voices.

"By Gawd," said one of them. "He shore got the right stuffings. Lookit 'im comin'!"

Then a well placed kick stopped the bible toter. . . .

There was a coldness about him, a tickling soothing iciness that hissed down his throat and cooled his chest.

"Please open your eyes," begged a feminine voice. "Please . . ."

He tried to open his eyes. He couldn't. He pushed his fingers at his eyes. He couldn't *open* his eyes. He cried out weakly.

Then gentle, cooling fingers were clearing the mucilage-like mask that sealed his eyes.

Whit Black saw a greenish haze with something lumped in the center of it. It gradually took form.

"Where am I, girl?" he asked, his voice a mere whimper.

"Please don't talk. I'm Sue Ella Rhine, daughter of the Minister here. I was riding and saw you lying near the cabin. I brought my father and he helped bring you here. He's getting a doctor."

"I'm all right," Black said, propping himself on his elbows. He was about to throw aside the sheets when he looked down at his water matted, hairy chest. He was naked!

He quickly made a motion toward covering himself and froze as a sudden, shooting pain creased along his spine.

The girl gently eased him into a reclining position and tucked him under the sheets. She said:

"Dad didn't know how badly hurt you were. He removed your clothing to see if you were wounded by some weapons."

Black didn't appreciate the warm tinge of red that rouged her young, attractive face. He was asleep. It was always easy to sleep away a huge, dull ache.

She smiled at the hard face that was boyishly relaxed in sleep. The thin lips opening and closing with painful breathing. The jet black hair dank from her damp cloth.

She visibly shook herself. The handsome stranger wasn't interested in taut-breasted, rounded girls at the moment. She would have more opportune moments to draw attention to herself.

She blushed at her own thoughts.

"SIR," said the pawky medico. "You are a hard headed, tough boned hombre with a lucky streak this wide." The doctor illustrated his point with stubby, almost clean hands.

Sue Ella said quickly: "But he isn't supposed to get from bed yet, is he doctor?"

Doc Mose Livint smiled. "A man's a fool to get outa bed afore he has to I always say."

Minister Ralph Rhine watched this by-play of words with a studious calm. he said:

"Perhaps Mister Black will tell us what caused his beating. That, I believe, is more important to us than having an unexpected guest in the house."

Black grinned, so they didn't know. "I happen to be a bible preacher," he explained. "Didn't you see my bible?"

The Reverend Rhine nodded. "We didn't think it was yours. My apologies, sir, I have a young daughter with me. I didn't want the wrong sort of person in my home."

"I understand," Black said. "But there's plenty I don't savvy yet."

"Good day," said Doctor Livint, "I wish you won't need my services again." He winked at Sue Ella. "A practical woman always makes the best

type of practical nurse." He left.

"What did he mean by that?" the Minister asked of his daughter.

"Whiskey soaked old fool," she said.

Black grimaced. "I'd appreciate knowin' what in thunderation goes in this town. I jus' made my usual little speech in the biggest saloon, askin' for someone to come out to a clearing and listen to my talk. I have been laughed at before. But never by a whole crowd."

Minister Rhine was amazed. "You mean you went into the *biggest* saloon and made that statement?"

"Yes."

"Why that's Zach Zane's Three-In-One," Sue Ella said. "No wonder you were beaten."

"Three-In-One?" asked Black.

"Yes," interposed the Minister hastily. "A gaudy name for a gaudy hellhole. Three-In-One implies that his huge building houses a saloon, gaming tables and ladies."

Sue Ella smiled. "Females," she corrected.

"Yes," said the Minister. "But how did they get you in that lonely section of town?"

"Well," Black said. "Five of the men in the saloon said they'd come and listen to what I had to say. When I got there they jumped me. Why?"

"Simple enough," said the Rev. Rhine. "They don't want any decent people here. It would spoil the business of the vice lords who have easy pickings of it. What with all the people coming to our town since it's a railroad town now and cattle can be shipped from this point."

"How come they let you stay?" asked Black.

"I was here when this was just another sleepy Saturday night town. I guess they tolerate me, but attendance has dropped ninety per cent."

Sue Ella said angrily, "That's because our Church was burned to the ground. It's that ugly Zach Zane's work."

"This Zane feller always here?" asked Black.

"No," snapped the girl. "He was with the vermin that came into town with the females and gamblers."

"How about the decent folk?" asked Black. "Won't they help you build a Church?"

"No help," said Minister Rhine. "Workers are in demand all over town. I couldn't pay one quarter of the wages. And I guess most of the people are afraid to make an open donation for fear of the consequences."

"Where's the law?" Black wanted to know.

"He deals black-jack for Zane in the evenings," said Rhine, Sr.

"And he sleeps during the day," the girl said flatly.

Whit smiled ruefully. "Git me my pants and shirt will you, Reverent?"

"But—"

"But nothin'. Sue Ella, my horse, a black buck's hitched in front of the Three-In-One. Bring it here will you?"

"You can't get up now," she gasped. "Please."

"Where will you go?" asked the Minister.

"Start a crusade," Black said, taking his clothes from the Minister.

SUE ELLA left the house. When she returned a fully clothed Whit Black smiled at her. He brushed past her and went directly to the saddle-bags of his mount. He removed two cartridge belts and six-guns from the pouch, and entered the house.

Father and daughter couldn't think of anything to say while he checked and oiled the weapons.

He strapped on the gun-belts.

"You will return for dinner?" the girl asked, her eyes begging him not to go.

"I reckon so," he said. "I ain't got two silver dollars to my name. I guess I have to come back here to eat."

"Be careful," warned Minister Rhine, "Zane is a dangerous person."

"Thet's his worry," Black said, politely doffing his hat to the pale faced girl. He didn't bring along his bible. He hadn't forgotten it. He had some "whippin' in the Temple" to perform. He felt mighty saintly as he stepped into the saloon proper of the Three-In-One. He felt blasted happy as he paused at the green topped tables. Watched the intense men pick up cards, discard, pick up, bet, sweat, curse, drink and pray.

He ordered a glass of beer at the bar and carried the beverage to the table with the largest group about it.

The man with the pile of silver and gold coins before him was referred to as "Zach."

He was a cool headed gambler, winning and losing, always winning more than he lost. Black couldn't sense his "gimmick." He finally concluded that the man was a straight gambler.

The stakes were high, and Black felt the rushing urge to caress a deck of cards. If he had any money with which to gamble he wondered if he would have kept his promise. The one he had made in that little mission house a year ago. The one that meant that he wouldn't gamble again if the good Lord wouldn't make the doc cut off his leg. The infected leg. They hadn't cut off his leg. He even carried a bible now. That was part of the vow he took in that Medina River mission house. He intended to keep it no matter how strong the urge became to feel the friendly ruff of a pack of cards against his palms.

Anyway he was stony broke.

Zane won a twenty-four hundred dollar pot on two fours. That broke the spirit of the others. Twenty minutes later Zane was aiding two assistants with the chore of putting coins into a square metal box.

Zach Zane rose. He was of medium height with medium blonde hair and a partial smile played constantly about his face.

Zane made his face into a frowning grin. "The preacher," he said softly, as he saw the lank figure of Black. "Well?"

Squat Jack sided his boss and slender Pete flanked the other side.

Jack said, "You lookin' fer more trouble, mustuh?"

"I don't dodge it, Jackie."

"Then get away frum here."

Zane smiled, waved his boys away. "I heard of you. Don't you know where you are not wanted?"

"Last time I was here," Black said. "All I said was for the 'pokes and gents *who wanted* to hear a preach to come outside. Five of your boys came with me and then jumped me."

Zane said, "You are not quite suitable to the atmosphere. People come here to relax and game."

"I know that, Zane."

"Then what is your pleasure?" Zane said good naturedly. "Whiskey? Dice? Roulette? Poker? Or—?"

"I'm a preacher," Black said. He had hold of an idea now. An idea that if handled properly would give him more satisfaction than breaking up the even features of the gambler.

Zane shrugged. "You sky pilots are beggars, all alike. You want. Want money to continue your plaguing way, plaguing people with more worries than they have."

"Or relieving them," Whit said.

Zane fairly snorted, said, "Well

what do *you* want?"

"The attention of the decent people here."

"Start making an attraction of yourself," Zane said. "I got a mighty high powered poker game waiting for me upstairs."

Black smiled. He said, "I'm jus' a free lance bible toter. I jus' remind folks of God. I—I wonder if you are a *real* gamblin' man?"

ZANE'S interest heightened. "I haven't had a poker game to my liking since Shanghai. The Chinese know the reason and thrill of gambling. But then again the Chinese make the most of the few pleasures of this earth."

Black said, "You don't sound like a man who'd order five bully-pusses to beat-up an unarmed man."

Zane frowned. "I like your battered look, my friend. You are armed now."

"I know."

Black moved his slightly battered lips into a grin. "You're jus' not the apologizin' kind, are you, Mr. Zane?"

Zane chuckled. "Forgive me, you are of the Cloth—in a sense—you see I issued a standing order that anyone who disrupted the mood of my place should be instructed firmly and in such a manner that he would never dare attempt it again." Zane paused. "I'm afraid you sassed or attempted to fight them and your actions enraged them a bit."

"You talk right," Black said.

"Then what is your proposition? You hinted at one."

"Yeh. I ain't got no money but I love and know poker. Played it most all day long when I was a kid.

"I hear that you and the other saloon keepers hereabouts don't want a regular church—it burned down sudden like. And the Minister ain't got the money to have one built."

Zane sniffled. "Get to the point."

"You're the biggest saloon owner. How about all the drink places chipping in a hundred dollars to me."

Zane laughed. "What, to have a Church built?"

"No. For me to play you and the other owners a game of poker."

"It is no fun to play against one's own money," Zane said.

"I know," said Black. "But if you—and there's six of you—cleaned me out I give you my word I'll take Rhine away from here. And you'll have a free hand with things."

"What if you win?"

"The money I win goes toward building a Church."

"Nonsense," said Zane. "I have a free run of things as it stands. Why should I take a chance?"

"Because you're wishin' for a *real* poker game."

Zane pondered the point. "Quite true. You realize of course that I'm an honest player or you never would have broached such a proposition."

"Thet's right, Mr. Zane."

"I'll stake you, you can have a table here."

"No. Thet ain't the deal I gave you."

Zane angered. "Then get the hell away from here."

"I swear I'll rouse the town against you."

"You won't live to regret it, mister—"

"—Mister Whitney Black."

Zane chuckled. "I do believe you are a man of remarkable preceptions. And I admit I can't stand too much of an aroused public."

"Then agree to my deal. The others will come in if you lead the way."

"I've made it a rule," said Mr. Zane, "that I never gamble with my own money against my own. Is that quite clear. If you persist on that point I'll have you kicked out of here."

Black said, "Is thet your only reason for not giving me a chance?"

Zane smiled ruefully. "I'm a gambling fool in certain respects. I would not have reached these heights if I hadn't. But you interest me. Yes, dammit, that's the reason. I don't think you could raise five or seven hundred."

"I don't either," said Black. "But I was a bit of a gambler myself in the past and I kin understand your views. If I get the money I'll be back."

"And I'll be pleased," said Zane. He added, "Your beer is stale, may I have it freshened?"

"Thanks no. So long, Zane."

"Good bye," sighed Zachary Zane.

WHIT walked the short twisting streets of Crown Town, neither hearing or seeing the havoc of sound that was necessary in the erection of buildings. He bumped into many persons. Only the murderous droop to his mouth saving him the insult of a swinging palm or a pistol whipping. His bruised face suddenly relaxed.

He thought of Sue Ella. He hastened to the Minister's home.

"Oh, Whit," cried the girl. She appeared ready to hug him when her father stepped into the kitchen.

"I heard you enter," the meek man said. "Thank God they didn't harm you."

"How much money have you got?" Whit asked.

"Money? Why I have a hundred dollar account in the bank. But it's for food and medicines." The minister added quickly, "God forbid."

"Let me have it. You'll get it back."

The girl nodded to her father.

"But Mr. Black," persisted the old man. "What do you want that sum of money for?"

"To build your Church."

Sue Ella sighed. "It isn't one-fifth the price we need," she said.

"I know. But will you give it to me when I ask?"

"Yes," said Sue Ella. "You'll get it."

"Thanks." White started for the door.

"May I come along?" called Sue Ella.

"Sure." And they both walked out into the hot air that was very still.

"Where are we going?" asked the girl, linking her arm with his.

He grinned. The softness was appealing. "To the railroad station, to see what the train unloads."

"Oh I've watched the trains come in every day." She laughed, it was a friendly burst of sheer animal energy. "It's my only amusement."

"For a purty girl like you?" teased Black.

"Hush. Boys are leery of Ministers' daughters."

"Not where I come from."

"Where do you come from?"

"Ministers' daughters should know."

She blushed and he squeezed her arm. "You're as cute as a hairless pup," he said. "An' I'm trying to get you to dislike me. Thet explain it?"

"Then you do like me?" she said.

"Uh-huh. But I like apple pie, a fast stream and a good bronc.

"I'm quieted," she said. "Oh gosh, here comes the train. Ain't she pretty?" She realized her slip. "Isn't she pretty?"

He grinned. "As purty as a red-faced girl."

"Oh you." She jabbed him lightly on the arm.

They watched the motley crew exit from the three passenger cars. Whit whistled softly as he spied a well dressed pair. "I'll be," he muttered.

"What?" asked Sue Ella.

"Wait here," he snapped, and walked after the pair. He called:

"Hey Penn, Sisson!"

They turned.

The erect, tall one yelped. "Blast me to hell, if it ain't Whit Black!"

They shook hands.

"Glad ta see you," the smaller one said. "If I thought I'd lay eyes on you here I wouldn't have sat in on that game on the train."

"That fool, pup Penn busted us," Sisson said, pointing to the little man.

Whit's face fell.

"What's the matter?" asked Sisson.

"I was goin' to ask you boys for a little loan."

"Me too," Sisson said glumly.

"You do look seedy," Penn said. "Ain't there no poker devils 'round here?"

"I'm not gambling any more, Penn. I'm a bible toter now. I preach around."

Their mouths gaped.

HE TOLD his old friends the story. About the shooting fracas leaving him with a riddled leg. An infected leg that had to be amputated. He wouldn't consent. He made a vow that if he didn't die he'd preach God's word and not gamble again.

"Wal, I'll be damned," Sisson said.

"I feel the same way," Black said. "Only I am." He told them the situation.

"We got a couple of brand new fifties," Penn said. "But you know they're useless here."

"Why?" asked Black. He knew the value of brand new fifties to the pair.

"Town's not big enough," said Sisson, then glanced shyly at his glistening boot toes. "But I reckon for an old friend we could oblige."

"This train turns and pulls out in an hour," Black said. "You boys could swing it. I'll mail your money back to you."

Sisson grinned. "Send it to Ma Wilson's place in Chicago."

"Good." Whit smiled. "Boys, you'll have my prayers, always."

"Lord," said Penn. "It sorta disgusts me, listenin' to ya talk like thet."

"Penn," admonished Sisson. "He didn't mean it, Whit."

"I guess he didn't," said Black. "Ferget it, boys."

"I'm plumb sorry," said Penn. "We will have thet dinero rustled for you in a hour. Stay here, mebbe we'll get done quicker."

"How many places in town?" asked Sisson, glancing at his watch.

"There's 'bout five eating places, seven saloons, not counting the Three-In-One. It's the biggest. Don't try it. The boss there is a smart cuss."

"Thanks for the tip," Sisson said, straightening his shoulders. "Be seein' you, Whit."

"Yeh," echoed little Penn. "We'll shore be seein' you."

Black walked back to the girl. She gave him a curious stare but she didn't ask the obvious question.

They walked back to the house. They stood under an ancient tree, watching the wind sway the lofty branches.

"They're old friends," Whit said.

"I know. I mean I guessed." She took his arm, pushed herself toward him.

He kissed her hard and fast.

"Oh, Whit . . ."

He sighed wearily and sat on the bench surrounding the tree. She sat close to him.

"Tell me, Whit, please. I know you just kissed me for the kissin' . . . But keep me interested. You can, Whit. It's so boring here. You're the first man I ever met that has me blissin'."

"Penn and Sisson are two wonderful crooks," he said, watching for the effects of his words.

She only smiled, drawing a bit closer

to him.

He decided upon making it a well told tale. "Wal, you know how we need money. Right 'bout now Penn and Sisson are eating in some eating place. Not sitting t'gether, mind you, But at opposite tables. And right 'bout now Penn is payin' the cashier. . . .'

"Seven dollars," said the seedy cashier.

"Here." Penn handed her a brand new fifty dollar bill.

She calmly counted out his change. Fifty dollar bills weren't a rarity in Crown Town of late.

"Thank you," said Penn, walking away.

Sisson finished his coffee and joined the line surging past the cashier's stall. The place was doing a roaring business.

She picked up the little slip of paper Sisson handed her. She read from it. "Coffee." She burped. "Fifty cents."

He gave her a dollar. She gave him fifty cents change. He walked away, lighting a cigar.

Five minutes later Sisson pushed his way to the head of the line and said to the cashier: "Ma'am, you gave me the wrong change. I gave you a fifty dollar bill and you gave me change for a dollar."

"I did not," she said. "You had coffee, you gave me a dollar."

"Look, lady, I gave you a fifty; I know what I gave you."

"Then why didn't you ask me then and there for the right change *if I* made a mistake?" she snapped.

"Git movin', mistuh," a burly cowpoke growled. "I want to git outa here."

The rest in the waiting line yelled for service also.

A PUDGY little man with silly motives behind his forced grin came to the stall.

"What's the matter, Polly?" he asked.

She said, "This man says I gave him the wrong change."

Sisson told the manager his story.

"But, sir," fussed the little man. "Polly doesn't make mistakes. You should have checked before leaving the stall."

"Damn' right I should've," snapped Sisson, wheeling and starting for the door. He turned abruptly and came back to the manager. He said:

"I just remembered. The reason I didn't count the change was because I had two fifties—*brand* new fifties from the bank at Redon—and a single. I thought I gave her the single."

"Well?" asked the manager.

"The serial numbers on the two bills should be practically the same, exceptin' the last number, right?"

"Yes," agreed the little man. He motioned to Polly. "Get the fifty dollar bill he says he gave you. It should be a brand new fifty."

Polly took the only brand new bill in the till. The one Penn had given her. She was a little mixed up herself now. She didn't say a word.

Sisson took the other fifty from his pocket, he read: "Serial number 999-878-678."

The little man nervously reached into his pocket and counted out forty nine dollars and fifty cents change for Sisson. "You are right, sir," he said. "The serial number on this bill reads 999-878-677. You did say you got these new fifties at Redon?"

"That's right," said Sisson haughtily. "An' I hope your cashier will be more careful in the future. I got an important business engagement."

"We are terribly sorry," gushed the little man, but Sisson was hurrying through the door.

"An'," concluded Black. "He's workin' the other places right now."

"But," began the girl . . .

"It ain't honest," Black said. "But compared to the inflated prices they're charging it's real mild like."

She smiled. "And you're doing all this for Dad—and Crown Town."

"I ain't doin' nothing right now," he said, rising to his feet. "I got to be at the railroad station to get the money from the boys."

"God bless them," said Sue Ella.

"What else kin He do?" grinned Whit, pausing long enough to take her in his arms.

"You know," he said, as he held her at arms length. "I think you're a mighty fetching girl."

"I ain't fetched nothin' yet," she mocked.

"Jes' keep putting this much effort inta it and ya'll get results *pronto,*" he said, leaving her to stare at his retreating back.

"You blamed fool," she murmured, shivering ever so slightly. . . .

BLACK sat on the freight dock gazing at the glint of the railroad track. He wondered what the Reverend Rhine would say if he knew Black was going on *whether* Crown Town would have a Church or no religion whatsoever.

Two gentlemen, sweating profusely, strolled past the distracted Black. He glanced up at them. The shorter one made a little motion with his hand.

Black followed them into the wooded area behind the railroad station.

"Gee-roos-a-loom," wheezed Penn. "It was tough goin', Whit, but we made it. Here." He handed Black a sheaf of bills. "There's a little over three hundred there. We got enough ourselves. Don't worry 'bout us."

"You know," said Sisson. "I think we'll work the small towns from here on in."

"Yeh," said Penn. "It's so easy convincin' 'em."

Sisson glared at the little man. "Next time I do the eatin' and you do the coffee drinkin'."

"Why shore," drawled Penn. "But the train'll be pulling out most any minute now."

Black warmly shook hands in turn with each of them.

"Boys," said Black. "If you ever need a favor try and get word to me."

"Sure as blazes hope not," said Sisson, grinning carelessly, and making a dash for the train which was gathering up steam. Little Penn waddled behind him.

Black smiled and waved to them.

The supper plates were washed and put away and Whit was counting the pile of currency on the table. "With your hundred," he said to the Rhine family, "it makes four hundred and thirty dollars."

"What are you going to do with the money?" asked Minister Rhine.

"Double or triple it, go about and get a collection. When they see the four hundred they'll know we ain't got so hard a pull ahead of us and mebbe loosen up."

"It may succeed," said the Minister. "Good luck, son."

"Thanks." Whit watched the corners of Sue Ella's lips pucker thoughtfully. They both couldn't be thinking of the same thing—he hoped.

Black's first stop that evening was the Gold Penny Saloon. Jock Burnt was an ex-prize fighter, ex-convict, and ex-foot-pad. He was a very reliable person.

"Jock," Whit greeted. "How are you?"

Jock guffawed. "You sure smooth talked Zane, preacher. What you want with me? Not that I'm listenin'."

"I come here to give you an invite to a sweet poker game. All the saloon owners will be there. It'll be held in Zane's place."

Jock looked surprised. "You mean you dug up enough to sit in on a game?"

"Yep. You be there?"

"Wouldn't miss it fer Lillian Schwartz. An' Lillian Schwartz is the one gal in my place who wouldn't spit on the best part of me."

Black grinned. "Mebbe your good will will help you."

Jock said a lewd word. "Could be," he amended. "Could be. Say: When this game bein' held?"

"You'll get word. Mebbe tonight. Mebbe tomorrow night."

Black visited the other five saloons and was treated in good fashion; all of them anxious for the "show-down."

Whit walked into the Three-In-One. He was informed that Zane was in his office up-stairs.

"Black," said Zane. "I had a hunch I'd be seeing you again."

"I'm set for the game," Black said. "The other saloon keepers are set too. You backin' out?"

"Hell no. I was hoping you'd get up the money. Tonight?"

"Err—no—how 'bout tomorrow night. I want to scrape up as much as possible."

"Fine." Zane's eyes gleamed. "Then till tomorrow night."

They shook hands in a friendly fashion.

WHIT walked down the stairs and waited for a space to appear before the bartender who was nearest to the cash register. He bellied up to the bar.

"Yeh?" said the bartender.

"How'd you like to make fifty dollars?"

"Iffen I robbed Zane he'd cut my throat. I don't make fifty in three weeks here."

"Then you want to make fifty dollars?"

"Sure."

"Then meet me by the railroad station at midnight, eh?"

"Why midnight?" He seemed spooked of a sudden.

"Then what time can you get away?"

"I kin get away in fifteen minutes."

"I'll be there," said Black.

The bartender was good as his word. Whit said:

"All you have to do is this: Tomorrow night when Zane asks for a deck of cards, you give him this pack."

"Holy—"

"Now don't get scairt, they're expensive cards but nobody'll know they're bad ones. You just give his this deck." Whit took two sealed decks from his pocket, handed them to him. "The extra's in case he wants a fresh deck to change his luck."

The bartender laughed. "They look the same as the ones we al'ays use."

"I know," grinned Black. "And here's your fifty."

"The winnings goin' toward buildin' the Church?" the bartender asked.

"Do you care?"

"Nope. Hope you take his pants. The uppity son."

"It'll go toward buildin' the Church."

The bartender went away happy.

"Ready, gentlemen?" inquired Zach Zane.

They all nodded. It was going to be one hell of an eight-man poker battle.

Zane waved to the bar and the flat faced bartender nearest the till handed two packs of cards to someone lounging near the bar. That person brought the cards to Zane who broke the seal on one packet and threw them on the table.

"High card deals," he said, and started flicking cards to the players.

Joe Pie started the game. He had king high.

The game went along innocently for one half hour. Black, winning one hand, losing two and so forth.

Then Zane broke the seal of the second deck and Whit began to get nervous. Even knowing what the other fellow has for a hand doesn't matter when your luck's so bad you can't top him. And he couldn't afford to bluff. He had one hundred and seventy-five dollars left.

Black looked at three fours, he drew two cards. He picked up another four.

Zane had three kings. That was the second highest hand in the game.

"Raise one hundred," Black said, dropping all of his chips into the pot.

"One hundred and one hundred more," Zane said, smiling.

Black took a ring from an inner pocket. It was a red stone in a golden setting. Black said:

"Raise you; what's that worth."

Zane examined it. "It's worth twelve hundred. You raising eleven hundred?"

"Yeh."

"I call," said Zane, adding another five hundred to the pot, grinning at the black garbed preacher.

He showed his four fours. They were damned good. He raked in the two thousand dollar pot—not counting his "bartar ring."

He made two more killings. One a fifteen hundred dollar pot and another of thirty-four hundred.

THEN Zane signaled to the bar for another fresh pack of cards. And for the first time in his life, man or boy, Whit Black quickly took stock of his chips. *He counted them.* No gambler ever did that. He had sixty-nine hundred dollars worth of chips before him.

"I'm pullin' out boys," he said.

"What!" It was Zane.

"We didn't say nothin' 'bout this bein' a blood game," said Black. "An' I'm pullin' out 'cause I won what I wanted to win, enough for Minister Rhine to build his Church."

"Let him go," laughed Jock Burnt. "With his luck we're better off with him out of play."

Zane grumbled but was forced to attend his hand as Jock raised two hundred on first bid.

Black moved quickly through the darkness to the Rhine house. The door swung open before he could knock.

"We were waiting for you," Sue Ella said excitedly. "What happened?"

He went to the table and dropped the money in the center of the table cloth. "Sixty nine hundred there," he said. Then he removed some bills. "Sixty-seven now. I need some runnin' expenses."

"You mean you *collected* that much from the riff-raff of Crown Town?" cried Minister Rhine.

"In a way. There was a big poker game in progress at the Three-In-One and they were willing to give some money to a good cause."

"Who?" shrieked the elated Minister. "I must go thank them."

"Strangers. No need for that. They'd be embarrassed."

"I guess so, Whit."

Black moved into his room and emerged carrying his roll.

"Wh-where you going?" Sue Ella gasped.

Minister Rhine kept a golden silence. If Sue Ella couldn't keep him in Crown Town he most certainly couldn't—ever.

"Jus' movin' on," Whit said. He quickly said good-bye to them and hastened out.

The girl followed him. She grabbed

his arm, clutching tighter with ever tearful breath.

"Did you—did you rob anyone?" she sobbed.

"No." He told her of the rigged decks.

"Bu—but you're a preacher. You told me—when you were sick—that you promised you'd never gamble again . . ."

"Thet's right. An' I didn't *gamble*. When thet square deck was put in the game I upped an' left. Ask anybody. I'm not one to go back on my word."

"Whit." Her voice softened to a whisper. "Darling?"

"I'll miss you, honey, but marriage ain't for me. Iffen I stayed I'd pet around you, and mebbe have to marry you. I don't want that. I'm a mighty weak man. Thet should be compliment enough fer you."

"I don't want compliments, Whit. I want you."

"How old are you, Sue?"

"Nineteen."

"Wal, I'm too much older'n you. Now get inside, thet wind's gettin' mighty cool."

"I guess I've made a fool of myself," she said.

"No. You didn't." He wanted to take her in his arms. He touched her shoulders with his fingertips and kissed her gently on the brow. "Good-bye, Sue Ella."

"You'll come back again—you'll come and visit—won't you, Whit?" She was crying in earnest now.

"Yes," he lied. "I will. 'Bye Sue." He mounted and kneed the horse away from the strongest temptation a man could encounter.

Two miles away he stopped to rest the winded horse. He gazed at the cold, glinting stars meshing the Texas sky. "An' some people make wishes on them cold sparkling things," he spat out. He rushed the animal forward.

Four miles later he was in a slightly better mood. He said to the sky: "Blasted if I could stand a preacher in the family."

Damned if he still didn't feel lousy. . . .

THE END

THE ORIGIN OF THE PEACE-PIPE

THIS interesting Sioux legend tells of the origin of the Peace Pipe, so important to the Indian ceremonies and customs. Many, many years ago, two handsome braves were sent by their chief to find a buffalo herd. As they rode along, they saw approaching them a figure, walking. As they came nearer, they saw that it was a beautiful woman. She carried a bundle of sage brush sticks.

One of the Indians decided to claim the woman for his own, and rushed toward her. There came a crash of thunder, a whirlwind, and a mist which enveloped the brave and the woman. The mist cleared away, and the second Indian perceived, fearfully, that the woman stood alone, still holding her bundle of sticks. At her feet were a pile of bones, all that remained of his bold companion.

The woman turned to the second Indian. Softly, she told him to go home to his tribe, and tell them that she was on her way to them. They were to place their tepees in a circle, with an opening to the north. Opposite the opening, facing the north, was to be erected a large tepee.

Trembling, the brave returned to his tribe with the message. Preparations were made as directed. The beautiful woman arrived and went to the large tepee, where she addressed the people. From her bundle of sticks she drew a small, beautifully carved and decorated pipe. This was the original Peace Pipe.

She gave the tribe a code of morals to follow, and gave them also forms of prayer, and many ceremonies which included the use of the Pipe. For instance, if they were hungry, there was a ceremony in which they held up the Pipe, which was supposed to attract game to the place.

Silently, in wonder and awe, the Indians watched and listened as the woman explained the uses of the Pipe which she had given them. Then she lay upon the ground, and arose as a black buffalo cow. She lay down again, and arose as a beautiful red buffalo. The third time she lay down she became a snow white buffalo cow. This beautiful animal turned and walked slowly away; and the people watched until it vanished over a distant hill top.—*By June Lurie.*

MIGRATION'S START

By WALTER CLARK

Independence, Missouri, was the springboard to the West—the jumping-off place to a bright new future!

A CENTURY ago Independence, Missouri, was the teeming, hectic starting point for the long trails to the West. In the 1820's, the Santa Fe Trail was being increasingly used for carrying supplies to the Southwest, and Independence was the logical spot where cargo could be transferred from river boats to wagon trains. The town grew around the business of supplying necessities to the Santa Fe trade. The mule markets were famous, and there were shops for building and repairing wagons, a bank, equipment for handling the transfer of freight, and the inevitable saloons and gambling halls which were a part of all the young towns of the day.

In the thirties began the urge to Oregon, and the first intrepid pioneers braved the long and dangerous route which came to be called the Oregon Trail. It was natural for them to go to Independence, where outfitting a wagon train was familiar business, and start their journey into the unknown from there. Each year the number increased, as more and more men, women and children set out for Oregon.

Then came the news of gold in California, and Independence became a place of vast excitement, rushing confusion, and purposeful bustle as emigrants by the hundred prepared to go into the West. Especially in the springtime, when most of the migrations began, the hubbub was terrific, as the place became a maelstrom into which swept masses of sweating, shouting humanity, and tons of food and equipment, all of which emerged in due time as more or less organized trains of wagons bound for California, Oregon or Santa Fe.

The city was actually several miles from the river. The bales of freight, the hundreds of animals and the passengers came up the Missouri River to Independence Landing, and toiled from there to the city of Independence. The river itself was full of dangers, from shifting sand bars and drifting tree trunks, and from the fact that as the travel increased, any flimsy old boat was drafted into service, and apt to be seriously overloaded. Boiler explosions were all too frequent. One of the worst of these occurred in 1852, when the steamer "Saluda" explodel, and two hundred people were killed. But no disaster which happened to another could still the hopeful urge which each man felt within himself, and the migration continued.

Upon arrival at Independence, the emigrants prepared as hurriedly as possible for the next stage of their journey, the long wagon trek westward. The more foresighted brought their own tested animals and equipment with them from their former homes. Many, however, acquired these possessions from the shops and mule markets of the town, where were often calmly sold to the unsuspecting novice mules so wild as to be highly dangerous, and other goods of inferior quality.

Next to the menace created by unbroken animals was the excitement caused by the general presence of deadly weapons. It was considered essential that all the men be heavily armed as a protection against Indians and wild beasts on the trail, but those unaccustomed to the use of guns caused untold carnage and mutilation, inadvertently or otherwise.

Once equipped for the journey, the proper time to start was of vital importance. Feed for the animals was the prime factor involved, especially as traffic on the trail increased heavily. They must not start so early in the spring that the grass had not yet sprouted, unless they carried a supply of grain. Those driving oxen had to wait even longer, as their animals could not eat very short grass. Yet when they got into the desert country, the late comers were apt to find the forage practically gone.

Inevitably, the preparations were completed, the decisions were made, and each springtime the turbulent human river flowed out of Independence, moved westward by an urge that was irresistible.

I opens the door and the kid is ready to slug me

WE GOTTA BE DIGNIFIED, MAC

by Alexander Blade

SO YOU think you've had troubles, Mac?

You've got a good post-war job, haven't you? So have I. In the Immigration Service down on the Mexican border. You're not living with your in-laws anymore after a year or two out of the Army, are you? Neither am I. My apartment is no foxhole. Maybe you're hollering about your boss being a heel? He knows you're an ex-serviceman and treats you white, doesn't he? So does Inspector Karns. So maybe you're mad at the weather, Mac. So maybe I got it on you a little there, but . . . okay, go ahead and grumble anyhow.

You got a lot of everything you dreamed about while you were down in the Pacific or over in Europe or up in Greenland, didn't you?

All right, go ahead and squawk. You at least don't have to be dignified. We immigration officers do, Mac. That's where the trouble started.

I like the Immigration Service. Good job. Good pay. Interesting work. It's what I dreamed about down in the South Pacific. So when I get back I apply for training. They take my pedigree and check it to see if I am a clean cut young man who never hit his old lady over the head with a beer bottle. They investigate to find out if I am honest, loyal, of good character, a citizen, and never got skizzled and arrested for wrapping a telephone pole around my car radiator.

I am all of the above. I have no bad habits except playing poker and listening to radio comedians. So they send me to El Paso for six weeks of training, hand me a pair of green pants with black stripes down the legs and a flat brimmed hat, and tell me to go out and also buy my own gun. I am now on probation as an Immigration Officer and will go over to Douglas, Arizona, which is a half mile north of Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico.

That's where my troubles begin, Mac.

Not at first, you understand. We work in the station checking cars and the *passportes* which allow the Mexicans to come over for twenty-four hours to shop and visit, but not to work. We make the rounds of the smelter and mines and look over the Mexicans for wetbacks. A wetback, Mac, is a Mexican who slips across the border—supposedly by swimming a river—and goes to work on the American side, hoping we'll think he was born over here in the States. We check all incoming and outgoing freight trains and pull them off. We go to the railroad section gangs and ask them what is their social security number and have they any identification. If it's a first or second offense, we load them in the car and drive them back to the line as VR's.

A VR is a Volunteer Returnee, said Returnee Volunteering because we got him by one arm.

We have to tell them that it's against the law for aliens to enter the United States illegally and they mustn't do it again or we'll have to file charges against them before the U.S. Commissioner.

That's what we do with the new ones, Mac. They're mostly pretty good guys; just over the line working for much bigger wages.

Of course you understand that some, remembering how nice we gotta treat them, slip right back again and again and go on another job. So we have to put them in the *juzgado* until they eat up in board and room all the wages they had coming on the job where we found them.

After which we take them back again, broke this time, and give off with another *naughty-naughty boy* lecture about what's gonna happen when they

do it just *once* more.

Interesting work, Mac. I like it until that Saturday morning we get this call from Eagle Eye Annie. Eagle Eye Annie is a steel tower one hundred and fifty feet high down on the line east of both towns. Two of the boys keep watch up there with high-powered field glasses.

"Tower to car Forty-One," comes over the radio. "Alien has crossed under the fence and running toward First and E Streets. Boy about ten years old. Wearing shirt and pants, is barefooted. Carrying an object under one arm."

ED SAMPSON is driving. He tells the boys okay and steps on the gas and we do a Barney Oldfield down Main Street.

Something like a big sigh comes out him. "Porfie's probably back again," he says sadly. "Now we're in for it. I knew I shoulda stuck to punching cows."

"Who," I ask, "is Porfie?" We are scooting across the front end of a truck making a turn and the driver is sticking his head out the cab window to yell, "Hayseed!" at the back end of Forty-One.

"Porfie," he says, "is the biggest headache the Immigration Service ever had. We found some relatives of his a couple of months ago down in Cannanea and sent him down there to give the boys a rest, but it looks like he's hopped an ore train and come back again."

Between Douglas and Agua Prieta is about a half mile of flat, desert sand covered with big tumbleweeds and greasewood. We catch sight of Porfie. He's streaking across it like a cottontail with a bulldog after him. Over one shoulder is a *bola* kit for shining shoes. A Mexican kid's not a Mexican kid, Mac, unless he's got himself a *bola* kit.

Porfie sees us and puts on more speed.

"You might as well get initiated now." Ed says, grinning expectantly at me. A free show, huh?

We can't go out into the sand in a car unless you got a bulldozer along, so I hop out of Forty-One with Ed hollering, "Rah-rah-rah! Ziz boom bah! Education, Education. Three cheers for the Immigration!" He knows I went to college.

Funny, huh? He don't know that I was a track runner.

I take out after Porfie. As I said, Mac, I am a pretty good track man that first year in college before I get the notice that culminates in a Second Lieutenant's bars in an Infantry combat outfit. I hold my gun down on my hip with one hand and begin to unlimber. I haven't gone fifty yards before I get to thinking that Porfie has the makings of a pretty good track man, too.

Dodge, Mac? It's like a hound trying to get hold of a twisting jackrabbit. We go around bushes and I go over them. I reach one place and he's in another. Over in the car come sounds like somebody is laughing his fool head off. I am beginning to puff a little and sweat some more, but I finally get Porfie. He dives between my legs and under a backyard fence. I go over the top of him and then the fence. I played football in college too, Mac. I bring him down with a flying tackle that takes about a yard of hide off the palm of one hand.

I get him. He gets me too—with the teeth on one leg. I let out a yell and haul him up by one ear, I am that mad. Those whoops coming from over in the car don't help matters any either.

You see, we gotta be dignified, Mac. The rule books don't say anything about what an officer on probation is

supposed to do when an alien bites him. They don't say anything about lulus like the one who opens that back door either.

I am burning.

She is about twenty-two or three, I think, while I hold Porfie with one hand and the place where he bit me on the leg with the other. She's got blonde hair and the kind of a shape you used to pin up in the lid of your barracks locker box. She also wears a pair of nose glasses with a black ribbon.

"May I ask," she inquires acidly, "just what you think you're doing with that boy in my back yard?"

I can think of a very funny crack to make about what I'd like to do with that boy in her back yard, but the rule books won't allow even a little. I let go the bite and straighten.

"I am," I begin with calm dignity, or at least as much as I can scrape up under the circumstances, "an Immigration Officer and I—"

"I'm quite aware of that," she cuts in like a knife through soft oleomargarine, "and I'm also aware that you are, against regulations, handling him in a manner quite unnecessarily rough. Turn him loose at once. Porfie, come here."

"Porfie will stay right here," I say firmly. Dames and aliens, you gotta treat them alike. Firm, Mac.

I TRANSFER my grip to his arm and she comes down the steps. Her voice isn't the only place where there's ice. It's in the eyes back of the nose glasses. I am not too mad to notice they're a kind of clear blue. She comes over to Porfie, who's standing there grinning and not panting. I am not grinning either, but I am certainly panting a little. The place where he bit me still hurts.

So she thinks I'm a brute, Mac? The rule books again. They won't let me pull up my pants leg and show her a big blue hickey garnished around the edges with teeth marks.

We gotta be dignified, Mac.

She takes Porfie's head in her hand and pulls him protectingly over against that shape covered up by a white house dress—and damned it she don't start talking to him in fluent Spanish!

"You bad boy," she scolds. "I told you not to come back again until I can get your passport. But I knew you would," she adds.

"I don't want a passport, mamacita," Porfie says, grinning up at her and then at me. "It's more fun to be chased by these big soft heads."

He used the word *palomo,* Mac. And I know my Spanish. You learn it after years along the border, four of it in high school, plus another of advanced study in college. *Palomo* means a soft hearted guy who lets everybody impose on him.

Palomo, he says!

And Mexicans don't use that word. It's from the early *Californios.* I begin to get suspicious. So she tells him he hadn't ought to of come back, huh? He's been there before.

"If I'm not getting personal," I say between pants, "would you mind telling me who you are lady, and what's your connections with this alien?"

"You are getting personal," she comes back in tones like cubes from a refrigerator. "You're not only personal but offensive."

Offensive, she says! My leg is still hurting where he tried to take a chunk out of it with his teeth and my hand with the gravel in it don't feel so good either. The hell with the rule books. I just don't like this lulu in spite of her shape, I don't like the glasses with their black ribbon, and I am positively not feeling any big brotherly affection to-

"You're not only personal, but offensive," she says to me.

ward the cause of it all, who's still standing there grinning like a pet monkey. The sweat around my collar starts turning into steam.

"So I'm personal and offensive, she says," I holler indignantly. "Lady, I wouldn't get personal or offensive with you, even if you didn't wear the glasses with the black string."

That one, Mac, really puts me back on top again. Nothing makes a lulu so mad, not even a rough pass, as to refer to her glasses. She yanks them off and I see I wasn't mistaken; the eyes are a clear blue, all right. They also are colder than a polar bear's backside on an ice floe.

"For your information, I don't have to wear glasses. I do so because of my students in high school. Some of the seniors are er—quite grown up."

So it's a school teacher she is, huh? So she's got to wear pince-nez glasses on account of her looks and shape, eh? And maybe she's been doing a little extra activity in Spanish with Porfie on the side. Hoh! I am still steaming.

"And you've been teaching this alien a little 'correct' Spanish, eh?" I cut in, remembering what he called me.

Palomo. Hah!

"I have," she says coolly. "I have taken a personal interest in Porfie's welfare."

"Yes, and I've taken a professional interest in Porfie's welfare, too," I snap back, wishing I could bend down and rub my leg where the hickey is. "He's going right back across the line with his bola kit, and if I catch him over here again he'll go before the U.S. Commissioner on charges of illegal entry."

"That I already know. It would look good on your record, wouldn't it? Imprisoning a mere baby."

"It'll look bad on your record for aiding and abetting an alien," I come back at her.

THE nose goes up a trifle. I notice its contour is mildly shaped like the one I got after a football practice scrimmage. But mine ain't mild, Mac. I got it busted.

And from the look she gave me I almost thought I was gonna get it busted again.

"I wish you'd try it," she says coolly. "Mr. Karns, your superior, is a very good friend of mine. When you make your report to him, just say it was Miss Pelroy."

So her name is Miss Pelroy? I wouldn't have asked her first name for all the beef in Mexico, but a Federal officer has to be thorough. Little Porfie mildly redeems himself by calling her Maria. So her name is Mary Pelroy? So I'm not personally interested, just professional. It's a part of our training.

She stands there and pats his head and looks at me like a shark eyeing an oyster. "Mr. Karns knows of the personal interest that I have in Porfie. He's an orphan."

I am too mad at this lulu to let that one pass, and damn the rule books. "He oughta be," I say nastily. "He's about sixty years old and a grandfather."

"I was referring to Porfie, not Mr. Karns. But Porfie has nobody to look after him. He slept in a barn over there on old gunnysacks until they sent him to relatives in Cannanea, who don't want him. He eats whatever he can manage to buy from what pitifully little money he makes shining shoes. And now you're taking him back across the border without giving the p-poor little thing even a chance to eat a good breakfast, you b-big brute."

The rule books again, Mac. They don't say anything about this. But I'm a sucker for a crying lulu. I see those blue eyes begin to get misty, Porfie standing there grinning like a hungry polecat in a chicken coop, and hear

Ed's haw-haws out in the car. So he thinks it's funny, huh?

Okay. He can sit out there and wait. Porfie can have his breakfast.

You understand, Mac, that it's not because I'm tender hearted. And it's not on account of this lulu with the blue mist above that upturned nose and a lot of shape down the other direction. That's got nothing to do with it. But this Ed guy has set out there and let me do the dirty work. His leg hasn't been chewed on, his hand isn't skinned, and he hasn't got bawled out by a block of ice who thinks he's a heel.

I am just good and mad, that's all.

We go inside. They walk together. I limp along behind. We gotta be dignified, Mac.

The kitchen is all white and as neat as you'd expect of a school teacher on Saturday morning. There is a pot of coffee on the stove, and it smells good. She has plates set for two.

My six weeks of training has covered detective work too, and I don't have to figure any further. She was expecting him.

"Will you sit down, Mr. —"

"Black," I say. "Jess Black—and let's not have any minstrel show cracks about it either."

I am still pretty mad about the whole business. I think of what might happen if another call comes in from Eagle Eye Annie. I hope she's as good a friend of the big fellow as she pretends.

"Very appropriately named," she answers, and I see her lips twist up in a half smile. So now she's laughing at me, Mac! "Have a chair, Mr. Black, while Porfie has his breakfast. He won't be long. He's so hungry all the time that I can't make him eat slowly. Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

I don't want the coffee because she's made it, but I think of that smart guy Ed out there in the car and tell her I'll have a cup. Porfie has gone off into the bathroom and is splashing his face in the washbasin.

"He loves the bathroom," she explains, setting my cup on the stove and pouring. "He'll spend hours in it. He thinks it's the seventh wonder of the world."

More detective deduction. I could throw the book at this lulu and it wouldn't be the one that's been worrying me for the past few minutes. Aiding, abetting, harboring an alien. Insulting a Federal officer. . . . I take the coffee with my good hand, keeping the other one down. Next she'll be wanting to introduce me to the bathroom and a medicine cabinet.

I SIP the coffee and feel as foolish as a jackrabbit that comes home to find a skunk in its bedroom, and pretty soon Porfie comes back. His face is scrubbed clean and his damp black hair is combed.

Those, I think, are the dangerous kind; they're intelligent. You got to watch 'em.

I drink coffee and watch while he puts away three eggs, two slices of toast soaked with butter, a slug of strawberry jam, and enough milk to fill up a young milk pen calf. I figure his shine business must have been pretty bad the day before.

She's invited me to eat with them but a Federal officer is too cagey to be bribed. I'm not falling for any of that feminine wiles stuff, Mac. She'll have to be more subtle than that. I only took the two cups of coffee to be polite. Anyhow, I'd already had breakfast.

"You're new here, aren't you, Mr. Black?" she finally says, to make conversation.

"No, I've been here a month," I say, also to make conversation. We gotta be polite too in the Immigration Serv-

ice. Federal regulations.

"This is my second year here. I usually attend summer classes at the University of Mexico in Mexico City. I hope that someday I can send Porfie there. He's really a very brilliant boy. I've seriously considered inquiring as to the possibilities of adoption."

Adopting him, she says, Mac! So now she's the mother type, only she hasn't got a husband, huh? I put down the empty cup and got up. Next thing she'll be looking for a man with a good paying job and solid future like we have in the Immigration Service.

I change the subject very abruptly. We Federal officers have to be cagey, I told you, Mac. I switch to Porfie, who's wiping his lips with a napkin.

"We better get going," I tell him in Spanish. "By the way, what is your name?"

"Porfirio Jesus Hernandez y Gozalez y Muñeta," he says promptly. "But my name is Porfie."

He pronounces it Porfee. He leaves the chair, swings the bola kit to a shoulder, strides over and kisses her goodbye. "I'll be back in the morning for breakfast while these soft heads are asleep, mamacita," he announces. "But I wish this palomo hadn't caught me until I get up to town. It's a longer ride back in their new car."

Mary—I mean that lulu, Mac, she looks at me and busts out laughing. If I hadn't been so mad I'd have noticed then how white and even her teeth are. But I am boiling again and it's not on account of the two cups of hot coffee, either. Nerve, he's got; slugs of it. My badge and gun don't faze him at all.

I am so mad at the way she's laughing that I think it's about time I put this Spanish teaching lulu back in her place. University of Mexico, huh?

"It's not palomo," I snap at him. "She has been teaching you very old words not used any more."

He shifts the bola kit and looks up at me, his legs braced apart. "Very well then, Señor Immigracion, what is more correct?"

I told you he's intelligent, Mac. The kind you got to watch. And he *would* have to ask something like that. It just happens, Mac, that there's not a handy Spanish word lying around that means a soft hearted man who lets people impose on him.

"Well," I begin, feeling my face get red, "I—well, you see I don't know exactly. . . ."

She is shrieking all the harder when I limpingly haul him out the back door by the arm. "Goodbye, Mr. Black," she calls. "Take good care of him. And remember, Porfie, you must not come back again until I get your passport."

"I don't want a passport," he yells back over his shoulder. "I like to ride in the Señor Palomo's big new car."

MAC, I am burning like a wiener over a campfire. My ears are redder than a pair of fireman's underdrawers hanging out on the washline. We go back across the sand where Ed is lounging behind the wheel smoking a cigarette against regulations. I put Porfie and his bola kit in the back seat and get in front.

"You look," Ed grins, straightening and starting the motor. "like a tomcat that's just been shot in the stomach with a bootjack."

"Iz zat so?"

"Nice bundle of flesh."

"I didn't notice," I say, coldly.

"Oh, now didn't you? What did you think of that coffee?"

"Go to hell!" I snarl at him. My leg is still hurting.

We chauffer Porfie and his bola kit down to the Customs and Immigration Station and get out. I try not to limp

as we go under the arch. Four more of the boys are checking passports and it hasn't dulled their eyes.

"All right, you," I tell Porfie in Spanish. "I shall not put you in jail this time. But if I catch you across that line again without a passport I'll not only put you in an American jail but I'll paddle your pants to boot."

"All right," he says; and then in English. "Shine, Meester? You wanta good shine for a dime? Wan dime and I geev you good shine."

Ed is already inside so I give him the quarter and tell him to beat it. I go into the chief's office.

"Porfie again, eh?" he asks.

I nod glumly. Ed keeps looking at me and grinning. "He was down at Mary's house," he explains to the boss. "Jess and her are good friends now."

"Why, that's fine, Jess," Karns says. "Wonderful woman. Make some man like you a fine wife, unless Ed's given up trying."

I look at Ed and scowl. I am getting mad again. So he's been holding out on me?

"I hope he gets her," I grunt.

"So do I?" Ed answers. " You just go right on being mad at her, Jessie. I love it."

I ignore him and turn to the chief. "What are we going to do about this Porfie? How about a passport for him?"

He picks up a card off his desk. It's complete except for the picture; a passport. "Miss Pelroy has already taken care of that. She came over a few days ago when she found he was back from Cannanea and had some pictures taken of him. As soon as we get them from the photographer we'll give him his passport. Then this part of the United States Immigration Service can have a little peace."

"All right," I say. "But if I catch

(BACK COVER)

THE AMERICAN INDIAN— THE IROQUOIS

By WALTER HASKELL HINTON

AS HAS been pointed out on the back cover, the Iroquois was not a tribe but rather a loose group of a union of six separate tribes, the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas, and Tuscaroras. If the legendary history of the tribe is to be believed, Hiawatha, a Mohawk, and Dekanawida, a Huron, organized this league of tribes all living in Central New York, for the purpose of mutual protection and power for all. In its way, because each tribe sent representatives to a common meeting place, this was democracy in action. Oddly enough, this union of Indians was formed about 1550, shortly before the white man associated with it. After a time, the Indians acquired guns from the Dutch, and with their aid, subdued numerous tribes to the South and West. The Illinois were broken up by the Iroquois as were the Delawares. Usually, in the process the broken-up enemies were adopted into the Iroquois union where they became members of the component tribes. By this process, the Iroquois, by the time of the French and Indian Wars, had built themselves into a force to be reckoned with. Both the French and English tried for their support, with the English finally obtaining it.

THIS was a lucky thing for us. In the long drawn-out struggle that constituted the French and Indian War, most certainly, the English colonists, our forefathers would have been driven from the land, if the Iroquois hadn't sided with them. The fighting was intense and bitter, and but for the help of the Six Nations as the Iroquois liked to call themselves, the English would have lost. But the French tactics of treating the Indians even more shamefully then we, brought them over to our side. Anyone who has read James Fenimore's "Leatherstocking Tales" will recall the cruelty of the French. In any event, the Iroquois effectively blocked French aspirations to the New England territories.

FROM the history of the Six Nations, it might be thought that they were immense in numbers. This is not the case at all. It is believed that at no one time were there more than 16,000 tribesmen.

WHAT remains of this proud and glorious confederation still lives for the most part in Canada, where it was driven by the Americans during the Revolution. Here in the shades of their past greatness, they still enact a ceremony imitating that which was a strong part of their forefathers! It may be only a ceremony but it is reminiscent of the day of the tomahawk!

him back across that line—"

The chief has a receiver in his office to catch tower calls. Eagle Eye Annie's voice breaks in.

"Tower to car Forty-One. Tower calling Forty-One. Alien has just slipped through the fence back of the Customs House. Boy about ten years old. Wearing shirt and pants and barefooted. Carrying an object—"

"Here we go again," grins Ed. "Come along, dearie. I like to watch you run. You have such wonderful form."

We put Porfie back three times that day. By the time I go off shift I am a very tired man. I leave my gun in the station and at four o'clock go across the line to have a Mexican beer. Ed has offered to come with me but this is one time I want to be alone.

So I'm a brute, am I, Mac? So I'd imprison a mere b-baby, would I? Don't she know that Federal officers. . . . I drink the rest of the beer and go on down the street. It doesn't take long to find out where Porfie lives, he's that well known. Everybody knows a kid like Porfie. His home is an adobe hut out behind an abandoned house. I shop around and finally find a family who're pretty poor, but they can find an extra bed. The ten bucks I pay is fifty big pesos to the father. Yes, señor. Si, Señor. For the next month Porfie will have a bed and a share of their poor food. No, Señor, he will not tell anybody, by the Blessed Virgin.

"You better not," I mutter under my breath and take off down a side street. Ed and some of the others on the day shift might be over having a beer too.

YOU understand, Mac, that I'm just investing that dough to save myself a lot of trouble. I figure it this way. If this Mexican firecracker has some regular meals and a place to stay, then he won't be sneaking across the line to the house of this lulu with the mother instincts. I won't have to be chasing him and maybe getting bit again until Ed and I are switched over to the tower or the station. That means I don't run into this block of ice who thinks she knows all about good Spanish.

Pure and simple arithmetic, Mac. Good logical thinking. It's a part of our training. But even though I'm off duty the next morning, a Federal officer is still an officer at all times. So about eight o'clock I head off down toward E and First Streets again, kind of keeping to the side streets because Ed is prowling with another of the boys and might not understand. He wouldn't believe me if I tell him it's about Porfie, I think.

There's no car in sight so I straighten my tie and go right up to the front door. So she thinks she'll put one over on the Immigration boys, does she? Maybe he slipped over before daylight. I knock on the front door and wait. If Porfie is there, this lulu is going to get told off plenty for not calling the officers.

I am very determined on that point, Mac.

She comes to the front door and looks a little surprised. I expect to see those blue eyes start turning into ice cubes again.

"Why, good morning, Mr. Black," she says pleasantly. "What can I do for you?"

"I—uh—am down here to see about that alien," I explain. "He said he would be back, and of course you understand—"

She opens the door wider and begins to laugh. "Yes, he's here, having breakfast. He slipped over before daylight this morning. I found the poor little thing sound asleep with his shoe shine kit on the back porch."

I follow her into the kitchen. Porfie

is there, all right. So is Ed Sampson. Ed gives me the kind of a grin you'd expect from a man who ought to be back punching cows. I see the grin and I think of ten bucks down the drain and all of a sudden I wish I am someplace else. But fast.

Guys like this Ed Sampson just don't understand things like this, Mac. He thinks I am down here to see this lulu. It's not that at all, but you just try and explain anything so complicated to a man who ought to be back riding a horse.

"Good morning, Señor Palomo," Porfie says brightly from back of the toast in one hand.

"Hello, dearie," Ed grins nastily. "Nice of you to offer to help out while you're off duty. I never knew you liked me so much, Jess."

"I only came down," I begin lamely, feeling my molars grind, "to pick up this alien in case he got past the tower. I have about decided to file proceedings against him."

"That a fact? In other words, boy, you figure the tax payers should pay his board so you won't have to. . . ."

Those next ten minutes are rugged, Mac! That Mexican had been so happy over the ten bucks that he'd spilled the chili; and Porfie, bless his sharp little tongue, has come right back to his "mamacita" with the whole story about how the big palomo who had chased him and arrested him was now his new papa because he was paying for meals and a nice bed with real quilts.

I am sizzling, Mac. This lulu is looking at me with something in those glims that wasn't there yesterday morning. Ed is drinking his coffee and grinning that cat grin and saying he hopes I won't cry when his driver comes back from another call and they take Porfie back across the line again.

I get out of there in some kind of a strategic retreat, Mac. Don't ask me how because it's still a little hazy. The only consolation I can take is that in a day or two Porfie will have his passport and then I will be out of the mess. So I'm his new papa now. Hoh!

When I go back on duty next day Porfie has his passport. I breathe a big sigh when the Chief calls him in and gives it to him personally. I see the kid look at it and damned if I don't think he's going to cry.

"But I don't want it!" he yells.

"You must have that passport when you across the line, Porfie." Karns explains carefully. "You must show it to the officers like the other Mexicans do. You must not come to Douglas anymore through the fences."

"I do not like this passport," Porfie says firmly, looking the Chief right in the eye. "If I have this paper, the palomos won't chase me anymore. I have to walk all the way back to Mexico. But when I don't have it they bring me back in the fine car."

WE FINALLY get rid of him, and I breathe another big sigh of relief. I go back on the car with Ed and I am a new man. Life is wonderful for a whole week. Of course, I've had to drop down by Mary's—I mean that lulu's house a few times on and off duty just to make sure that things are all right, and they are very much all right.

Ed Sampson won't hardly speak to me anymore, Mac. But then I told you an ex-horse straddler like him can't understand things like this.

So we have a whole week until Porfie finally gets wise. He tears up his passport one day, and the fireworks start all over again. We threaten him and Mary scolds him and the Chief is beginning to scowl now. He gives them all the best break he can, but he's got to go by the rule book too.

I've been thinking things over and figure it can't go on. So I draw in a deep breath and light the match to the fuse. I take Porfie down before the U.S. Commissioner and file Federal charges against him for illegally entering the United States.

Mac, I started something!

I knew what Mary was going to say and she said it. My ears are still burning. The ice was back in her eyes and it wasn't a couple of cubes. It was the whole tray.

"To think that you'd do such a contemptible thing," she cries, dabbing at her eyes and sniffing. "That poor little orphan b-baby in a jail, to be tried before a Federal judge like a common criminal. I hope I never set eyes on you again as long as I live!"

I am sweating around the collar by the time I get into the clear again. That was bad, Mac. But I didn't count on the reaction from the other boys. They'd been pretty fond of the kid after all and would hardly speak to me. All except Ed. He would speak to me again.

"You did just the right thing, boy," he says, giving me a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Shows you've got the stuff. The old college spirit. Well, I got to run along. I'm taking Mary to the movies tonight. The poor kid is so upset over what you did that I'm trying to get her mind off it."

I go home wondering if a body can be identified if it's chopped up in small pieces and I don't sleep much during the days until Porfie's trial comes up in Federal Court in Tuscon. You ever hear of the word pariah, Mac? It's about the same as parasite. The same kind we used to get over in the jungles.

A louse, that's me, Mac. I see it everytime one of the boys look at me. I don't even see Mary at all. The news I get from her is secondhand. Through Ed. He is a very happy man these days.

I am a very unhappy man, Mac. But I figure I was right and that's that.

Porfie's trial opens in Tuscon one morning at ten o'clock. I bring him over from the jail to the courthouse. He's beginning to fill out a little from the regular meals, and he's even got a few bucks. The soft hearted jailer has let him take his bola kit inside.

I take him into the judge's chambers where I'd asked the hearing to be held. The State's Attorney is prosecuting. He comes in with a brief of the case and my statements of evidence. Then right behind comes Mary. She runs over and takes Porfie in her arms. The interpreter comes in too, watching her.

She won't even look at me, Mac.

"A-hem," the judge says, clearing his throat. "I—ah—believe that we now might consider this court in session."

He gets the proceedings under way. While I give my testimony Porfie sits beside Mary. He's all eager and excited about the fuss being made over him. He listens while the interpreter explains what's going on. He kept busting up the works by eagerly asking his state appointed attorney and the judge, "Will you send me to the jail, Señores? Will you, will you?" I thought Mary was going to cry.

That was an uncomfortable half hour, Mac. I keep looking at Mary and wanting to tell her I think I've done what I ought to, but she gives me that cold stare and won't even blink.

Pretty soon the evidence is all in and the defense attorney tells the judge he guesses he'll rest and not make any defense. The judge clears his throat again.

"I have considered all the aspects of this case," he says. "I have heard the evidence of both the—ah—prosecution and defense witnesses. Therefore, I

find the prisoner guilty and sentence him to four years at the industrial school in Washington, D. C."

SOMETHING like a small cry breaks from Mary. She grabs Porfie and hugs him close and I figure I better get out. I sort of do a sneak out the door while he gets her handkerchief and wipes her eyes and jabbers Spanish at her like a string of firecrackers going off. He's telling her about him and me and the judge framing it up so he could get four years in *Los Estados Unidos* to learn English and a trade, with lots of good food and a real clean bed with sheets on it. He's going to come back to Mexico and get himself a big new car and make a taxi out of it.

I wait in the hallway and pretty soon she comes out. She's wiping her eyes. I start to go on but she says, "Wait, Jess."

She comes up and lays a hand on my arm. The ice is gone from her eyes, Mac. She don't look like a school teacher now, and what she says don't sound like one either.

"You big overgrown lug," she almost hisses. "So you had it all framed up, didn't you? A free education and a chance to get started out right, and you wouldn't tell me, would you? Why?"

I tell her I don't seem to be so hot at explaining some things, like that first morning in her back yard and then when I went down the next morning too.

"I never saw a kid so happy," she says kind of softly. "His eyes were actually shining. And when I told him that perhaps some day I can adopt him—"

What is she saying, Mac! Adopt him, huh? This lulu gets sore at me for what I do for Porfie, then she's glad about it, so now she and that little cuss have pulled a frame on *me*. I hadn't planned on anything like that, Mac. Troubles you got?

I didn't plan on what hapened five minutes later either. I had to wait that long to get this lulu—I mean Mary out in the privacy of my car where I can really cut loose on her, on account of it wouldn't look good for a Federal officer to be bawling out—I mean kissing a girl right in the hallways of a courthouse where there is a dozen other people present.

As I said, Mac, the rule books say we gotta be dignified.

RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY

By CORD McKAY

Prayer is as powerful as dry ice—in fact, more so!

RAINMAKERS have been fairly common throughout the world; in times of drought when the welfare of great groups of people has been threatened by lack of rainfall, men have come forward claiming supernatural ability to make it rain. But in the equatorial mountains of Africa where rain is usually all too plentiful, the natives have a man who makes the rain stay away as much as possible.

The rain man blows a whistle to make threatening black clouds blow over, or to stop the rain once it has started to fall. The power is believed to reside in the whistle, and only secondarily in the man who blows it. This instrument of magic is a strange sort of metal tube, wrapped in banana leaves. If the regular rain man is indisposed or for some other reason is unable to discharge his duties, then someone else will take over, but with only fair results, as there seems to be a certain skill necessary to the operation of the whistle, which the rain man has perfected.

If the clouds begin to roll up some morning when the tribe is tired of rain, or especially wants sunshine, then the rain man blows a few blasts on his whistle, and the clouds pass on. If a few drops of rain begin to fall, the blasts become loud and frantic. Should a quick deluge or hailstorm descend, then the rain man nearly bursts with his efforts, until the storm passes away.

The rain man's prestige in his tribe is enormous. He, himself, has implicit faith in his powers. Perhaps that great faith is in some measure effective, and accounts for the apparent success of his efforts.

BUNKHOUSE PUNCHER

by Richard Irving

Dave had to show them that he was a man—even if it meant standing up to Larkin's hate!

He clung stubbornly, refusing to be shaken off, determination raging through his dizzy, maddened brain

DAVE sat a little too quietly on his bunk. He was alone with his grey thoughts in the deserted bunkhouse. There was still a few minutes left before he had to go back to work.

The door slammed, and Dave looked up from his thoughts to see the beefy figure of Larkin standing near his bunk.

Larkin took a step toward Dave.

"You here punk. What's the matter, your job in the kitchen too much for you today?" he said sarcastically.

Dave moved uneasily on his bunk,

ignoring Larkin. The beefy puncher liked to ride people.

"For a kid only seventeen you're mighty proud, a little too proud," he said through compressed lips. He wanted to get a rise out of Dave.

For a moment there was a tense silence until somewhere a fly buzzed.

Larkin's harsh voice boomed. "Hey, punk, I'm talking to you!"

Dave stirred uncomfortably.

"Hey kid, the boys tell me that you want to be a puncher," Larkin jeered. "What's the matter, don't you like riding pots and pans. Can't get hurt that way."

Dave stood up, looked deliberately at Larkin, and said softly, "Go to hell!"

Larkin stiffened suddenly. "What's that, punk?" he said as if he hadn't heard correctly. Dave's eyes were on him, unflinching.

Larkin set his jaw and took a short quick step toward Dave.

"Why you little squeak! I gotta good mind to gun whip you!'

The door slammed and Lou the foreman strode in.

He shot an appraising look at Dave and Larkin.

"What you doing here, Larkin?" he said in a flat even voice. "You're supposed to be out in the corral. What the devil am I paying you for? To loaf around the bunkhouse?"

For a moment Larkin glared at Lou. There was no love between the two men. Then brushing past the foreman, Larkin shuffled from the bunkhouse.

Lou put his calloused hand on Dave's bunkpost. He said quietly, "Kid, it's time you were getting back to work too."

Dave nodded, thinking, "Lou's tough but a square shooter."

Lou started to leave when Dave said, "Hey, boss, can I talk to you?" The foreman stopped and said, "Sure kid, what's on your mind?"

"Well, ah . . . ah . . . it's this way boss. I want to do punching."

Lou studied the kid's face carefully.

"Son, I'd like to help you. I like your spunk," he said kindly. "But cow punching's a rough business. Take bronc busting. A man can get hurt bad. No, son, I couldn't let you do punching for a while."

Dave broke in, "It's because I'm only seventeen, that it?"

"No, son, it's not your age exactly. But you are kind of skinny and cow punching usually takes a big man."

Dave looked down at his feet. Biting his lips he said in a barely audible voice. "O.K. boss, thanks just the same."

As he started to leave again, Lou asked, "Was that lazy saddle tramp Larkin riding you, kid?"

Dave thought fast and shot back, "Naw, he wasn't bothering me any."

"Well, I was just wondering. I never liked his looks. Had to take him on a couple months ago because we was short handed."

Dave nodded and the two walked out of the bunkhouse together.

IT WAS after supper, and Dave was finishing up the last of the pots and pans. He vigorously scraped the inside of a large pan, wanting to get it spotless, hurrying so that he could get away soon from the grease and smoke. The job was monotonous but Dave was conscientous. He would never put any dirty utensils back on the shelf. If he wasn't careful the men could get sick from greasy pans or something like that.

In some ways it wasn't a bad job. He was his own boss in the kitchen and the pay was all right. He was dissatisfied only because he wanted to cow punch. And lately, the more he

dreamed about his desire, the harder it was to put up with the kitchen job. Of course, he felt disappointed about what Lou had told him in the bunkhouse, but a feller had to have hope. Maybe something would come up and he'd get his chance. . . .

Carried on the wind from the corral came the familiar round-up cries of the punchers. They were out there, gathering in the cattle before sundown. In a few minutes he'd go out there and watch them..

He neatly piled the last of the dishes in a drawer, and went over to the basin to clean up. A minute later, after taking a last look around the kitchen to see that everything was in its place, he put on his hat and left for the corral.

It was some three hundred yards from the cook-shack to the corral, and Dave walked them at a leisurely pace. It was like that, the minute he got in the outdoors, he'd begin to forget about the steam and grease of the kitchen, begin to feel better immediately.

It was a clear day and looking out over the unobstructed horizon he could spot the familiar lines of hills seven and eight miles off. If ever he moved away from this part of the country, he'd miss those hills. They were the first things he looked for on rising in the morning. Along their rims now, Dave watched edges of pink and purple hue growing with the coming sundown.

BY THE time Dave got there, little activity was taking place in the corral. The men had gotten most of the horses corraled for the night. In a few minutes they'd be going back to the bunkhouse after the day's work.

Dave stood on the second rail of the corral fence and watched the punchers. Swell bunch of fellers, he thought, glancing at their hard, clean bodies and sunburnt faces riding by. And they really knew their jobs. They could take the snakiest kind of wall-eyed range horses and tame them into finished saddle horses. True, riding herd wasn't easy, but at least they were on the outdoors all day.

A sharp wild bray startled Dave and he looked over to his left to see a big, chestnut stallion rearing up. It was the Old Outlaw. Dave involuntarily grinned in respect to the ornery horse who had a reputation for knowing more tricks to unseat a rider than a tinhorn shark does about a deck of playing cards. There was an animal he'd like to take a crack at riding some day! Only the best of bronc busters could stay with the Old Outlaw.

A familiar unpleasing voice droned behind him. "Well, look who's here. Our proud little kitchenhand himself!"

Dave didn't have to turn to know that it was Larkin. The beefy puncher climbed up on the rail beside him and pointed toward the Old Outlaw. "Quite a mean critter, ain't he," Larkin said slyly. Dave nodded.

Larkin's voice took on a suspiciously confidential tone.

"You know, punk, I sure can't understand why you want to be a puncher. It's dangerous work you'd be getting into. Every so often the boss would ask you to bust a bronc like the Old Outlaw there. Naw, punching's not for a skinny kid like you. A man's got to be able to take it. You'd better stay in the kitchen. It's a lot safer riding pots and pans."

Dave's face reddened. "That's the second time today you've made that crack, Larkin." He started to say something else, broke off, and before Larkin could snap back he said, "I wouldn't be afraid to ride the Old Outlaw."

Larkin's eyes blinked several times, and then he gave a thin laugh. "You

can't kid me, punk. You're too yellow to try riding that horse. You'd be scared he might break your neck."

Dave grinned challengingly at Larkin. "I'd be willing to take my chances."

For a moment Larkin stared scornfully at Dave. Then he slapped his thigh and sneered, "I could fix it up for you to ride him right now. How about it?"

Dave looked down blankly at his hands and said calmly, "Sure, why not?"

Larkin leaned closer, searching Dave's down-turned face. "If that critter hurts you I don't want you telling the boss I got you to ride him. You gotta say it was all your idea, punk," he said solicitously.

"O.K.," Dave said impatiently, "it was my idea. Now clear out and bring on the Old Outlaw."

Larkin forced another thin laugh and then swung over the rail, droping into the inside of the corral. Dave watched him swagger over toward the Old Outlaw. He realized that Larkin had tricked him into riding the wild stallion, but it was too late to back out of it now.

HIS stomach began to knot up as he imagined himself getting thrown. He fought against the rising fear. He wasn't going to give Larkin the satisfaction of seeing him back down. Larkin would tell the punchers if he did and they would think he was yellow.

Larkin flipped a loop around the Old Outlaw and led him back toward Dave. The willful horse tugged against the rope. While the two men were struggling to screw a rigg onto the stubborn stallion, Len, one of the punchers, appeared and wanted to know what was happening.

Larkin said, "The punk got the brainstorm that he wants to ride the Old Outlaw. I tried to warn him, but he's set on killing himself. I'm obliged to help him rig up this ornery critter."

"You know the boss gave orders that nobody should try to ride this horse unless he said it was O.K."

"Sure, I remember, Len," Larkin said, a hard gleam showing in his eyes, "but the kid wants to be a puncher. I say let's give him a chance." He turned toward Dave. "Ain't that right, punk?" he said acidly.

Dave said nothing.

Len threw up his hands in disgust and walked away.

Watching the wild-eyed stallion pound the turf, Dave was thinking, "You couldn't trust the Old Outlaw. There'd be no warning when he went wild. And when he got that way, it was impossible to stick with him. If a man fell the wrong way he could be trampled to death. . . ."

The rigg was screwed on and Larkin stepped back. He snarled at Dave, "Get up, yellow!"

Dave facetiously tipped his hat to Larkin and slid onto the Outlaw. He slipped his boot heels up against the oxbows. There was a nervous twitch in his legs that he hoped Larkin would not notice.

Len, who was watching from a few yards away, yelled at Dave, "Get a deep seat, son! Screw down tight to that old boy!"

A moment later Dave signaled that he was ready. Larkin turned the Outlaw loose. Dave threw both hooks into the horse's shoulders. The stallion leapt up, facing the east and came down facing the west. Dave was thrown out of his timing. Without giving his rider a chance to catch his balance, the Outlaw stampeded for about fifty yards and then "broke in two" in the middle of a dead run.

Dave was conscious of being jolted up and down, of the land and air whirl-

ing by. He saw, in flashes, the faces of Len and Larkin. He heard Larkin's whoop—"Ride 'em, cowboy!"

He clung stubbornly, refusing to be shaken off, determination raging through his dizzy brain. Leaping and twisting, suddenly the stallion got completely out of hand. He struck out angrily with a dozen crooked bucks in all directions. Reared up with an extra vicious lunge. "Swapped ends." And started back with an empty saddle.

Dave was thrown hard, hitting the turf with a jar. He lay flat for a while, the wind knocked out of him, cobwebs in his head.

HE GOT up slowly and found that though his arms and shoulders were severely bruised, no bones were broken. He began dusting off his clothes.

Larkin had watched Dave's performance with surprise. He wouldn't even admit to himself that the kid had turned in a good show for a first try at bronc busting. As Dave was getting to his feet, Larkin walked over to him, jeering, "Better stick to the pots and pans, punk."

Len came up and asked Dave, "You O.K., son?" Dave nodded.

"You gave the Outlaw a good ride. I was proud of you," Len said warmly.

Dave glanced at Larkin, catching the disappointed expression on his face.

Larkin spit on the ground and tried to laugh. "Boy, did you notice how scared the punk looked," he said to Len, avoiding Dave's eyes.

Len refrained from comment and Larkin muttered, "Just plain yellow, that's what he is."

Dave's voice shot out, "Go to hell, Larkin!"

The beefy puncher blinked as if he were trying to shake himself out of a daze. He fairly reeled with anger. "What the hell is the matter with you, punk?"

Dave said just loud enough for it to reach Larkin's ears, "Why don't you shut your long-winded mouth!"

Larkin blanched. "Who do you think you're talking to you, you lousy kitchen hand!" he cried.

Dave took a breath. "Loud bark, small bite Larkin," he said, smiling.

"I've got a good mind to knock that smile down your throat!"

Dave knew that he could say one more word and have Larkin swinging. Or he could apologize and let him cool down. He weighed the alternatives for a moment and then he said, "Well, why don't you try it?"

Len, who had been silently standing nearby all the while, started to step in between the two men. His voice rose in alarm, "Now fellers—"

Dave gently pushed him aside. "Leave us be, Len," he said.

"But, kid," Len pleaded, "you're bruised bad. This is no time to fight him."

Dave waved Len's advice away. "He's been aching for a fight with me since the first day he got here. And this is as good a time as any."

Larkin swung first. Dave was ready and the blow went harmlessly over his shoulder. The two men were about as tall as each other but besides Dave's ripped shoulder and arms, Larkin had a heavy weight advantage. Dave figured to keep away at first, stab him from a distance, try to tire him out, then finish him later.

But Larkin was far from being a pushover. He came in close, grabbed Dave, pounded him around the ribs. Dave tried to pull away, but Larkin's grip was too strong. Larkin kept plowing in blows to the mid-section. Dave pulled away finally, leaving a piece of his shirt in Larkin's hand.

Suddenly some of the cow hands rushed up to the two men and began pulling them apart. At this moment an authoritative voice rang out, "Leave them alone, boys!" It was Lou, the foreman, standing by himself near the corral rail. It was hard telling how long he had been there, watching the fight.

The men released the two fighters and stepped back.

Larkin and Dave moved into the center of the corral, trading punches. Dave took a low blow to his stomach, and stepped back to catch his breath. Larkin swarmed in, catching Dave again and again with flicking jabs. All the kid could do was to stick out his left feebly, and move away slowly.

DAVE began tiring. His shoulder felt numb. There was the taste of blood in his mouth. He played for time, letting Larkin do most of the swinging. Larkin began to grunt and puff. The sweat shone on his grim face. He began to throw less punches. Time was on Dave's side.

Then—Dave connected solidly with a right hook. The blood spurted out of Larkin's nose. Some of it splattered on Dave's sport shirt. Dave moved in fast to follow up his opening. But suddenly the ground came up and walloped him across the face. Out of a fog, he pushed himself up on his hands and knees, shook the buzzing out of his brain.

Larkin, panting hard, waited until Dave got up, and then he shuffled over to continue the attack. He banged a left into Dave's belly, crossed with a right to the chest. Dave doubled over, dropping his guard. Bent over, he circled like a cart wheel, trying to gulp air. Larkin upper-cutted a left, missed, connected, missed. Dave began to wobble, tried to back away, tried to breathe.

Posed for the kill, Larkin tracked Dave, and then—with his remaining strength, lashed out with a blazing right.

Dave was driven up against the corral fence. Larkin methodically measured him and drove in another right. Dave's knees buckled, and he went down into a sitting position. Only the fence kept him from stretching out full length. When he opened his eyes it seemed to be very dim in the corral. Glassy-eyed, he looked for Larkin and couldn't find him. He was thinking—not too clearly—about somehow getting back on his feet when Lou's face bent over him. Faintly, he heard the foreman asking, "Kid, you all right?"

Out of bruised lips Dave whispered, "Sure, boss."

Dave began to see more light now. The faces of the punchers were grouped in a circle above him. Someone was saying that he had put up a good fight. And then somebody else—he thought it was Len's voice—said, "if he hadn't been hurt, falling from the Outlaw, the kid might have licked Larkin at that."

Dave watched the foreman straighten up and speak to one of the faces above him.

"Larkin, I saw the whole thing, including the kid's ride on the Outlaw." The foreman's voice shot out sharply. "You put him up to that ride even though you knew it was against my orders. You wanted the kid to get hurt bad."

LARKIN'S gaze dropped to the ground. He played with a ring on his finger, trying to find words to fight back the foreman's accusations. But he felt empty and beaten inside. He knew Len was there, waiting for him to lie.

Lou took Larkin's silence as acknowledgement of his guilt.

"Larkin," he said, getting sore, "pack up and get off this ranch pronto! If I

catch you here in the morning, you and me is going to tangle!"

Larkin left, followed by the resentful eyes of the punchers.

Lou helped lift Dave to his feet. The punchers, still discussing the fight, turned and started walking to the bunkhouse, leaving the foreman and Dave alone.

Lou threw Dave a handkerchief and the kid began mopping up his face.

"You got a nice shinner under your left eye and your lip is banged up, but you'll be all right. You put up a good fight, son."

Dave looked at the foreman unbelievingly. "But I lost," he said painfully.

Lou chuckled. "No, you tried your best, son. Proved you can take it. I couldn't ask for more than that from anybody."

The two were silent for a moment and then Lou said, "Incidentally, we're short a puncher now that Larkin's gone. How would you like to take over his job?"

Dave answered quickly, "I'd like it fine."

KANSAS INCIDENT
By BILL CRAMPTON

GALLET, Kansas, was a sleepy little town on the Kansas and Western Railway, and it served as a way station for goods and settlers going West in 1874. That is, it was a sleepy town in the winter. In the summer when two and three trains a day were passing through it, it was active enough. But this particular winter's day in November, the whole town lay blanketed under a fall of snow that made it impossible for even the trains to move.

At the ramshackle wooden station at the North end of the town, a typical wood-burner of the Kansas and Western Lines stood. The five foot blizzard of the day before had practically immersed the train in snow and all that was visible was the locomotive where the engineer, George Layton and his fireman Bob Corwin still kept up steam, for it would not do to let the locomotive freeze up. The train was carrying a load of mining machinery on its seven cars as well as a great

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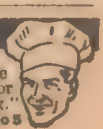
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deal of trades goods.

The conductor—one of those unsung heroes of the West—was Jack Lathrop, a native Kansan and as rough and tough as they come. He was dozing in the station, after having helped his fireman and engineer to keep up steam. He was taking a well-deserved rest. Outside the wind howled and flurries of snow swept viciously over the high-piled drifts. The glowing stove in the railway station cast its warmth within a radius of ten feet. The station master had long since gone home and the telegraph key was silent. The lines had been knocked down long since and it would take a long time before the blizzard's effects were dissipated.

Suddenly the door to the station opened and two men walked in. Both were masked and heavily furred and booted. Each held a six-gun in his hand. Striding over to the dozing conductor, one of them roughly shook him. Startled Jack Lathrop jerked awake. Half-asleep he peered at his assailant. At the sight of the gun his hands went skyward. He wasn't going to argue with a foregone conclusion. . . . . .

He knew what they wanted. Somehow it had leaked out, that stuck in the cab of the locomotive was a metal box with thirty thousand dollars in gold in it for the payroll of the Letter Construction Company in western Kansas which Lathrop was supposed to drop off.

"WHERE is the gold?" the hold-up man shot at Jack. Lathrop grinned. The masked man reached out and with his gloved hand slapped Jack across the face. That was too much. Like a lightning bolt, the sleepy looking conductor whirled, bent almost double and closed the four feet between his questioner and himself. He got a grip on the man's gun arm before he could shoot. And so they struggled. The attacker's companion could not fire for fear of arousing the fireman and the engineer in the cab twenty feet away. He closed in however and tried to slug Jack Lathrop. It wasn't the first time that Lathrop had tangled with railroad agents. His own gun was beneath his coat and so he couldn't get at it, but fortunately he managed to twist the attacker's gun from him. There was a muffled shot as he fired close against the man's body. He sank to the floor—hurt, but his pal, realizing the jig was up, started to shoot wildly at Jack. One of the shots caught Jack in the left shoulder, but like a flash he winged the agent. The man turned, badly wounded and started for the door only to run into the arms of Jack's engineer and fireman who had heard the shooting.

Lathrop, clutching his wounded shoulder tried to question the man but his shooting had been too accurate. The man dropped to the floor—dead. The first assailant however was merely wounded and as the three men questioned him, it came out that somebody in the pay-office had told them what the train was carrying. They thought it would be an easy haul and to save time looking, they decided to tackle the conductor. They didn't know that Jack Lathrop was a tough and experienced hand at that sort of thing and consequently they took it in the neck.

The Kansas and Western gave Jack no special commendation. It was in the line of his duty, they thought. Jack Lathrop's name came up many more times in precarious situations, where only quick and straight shooting saved him. Someday someone will compile a history of Western heroes and they'll have sense enough to include a gang of the best—the railway men who opened up the west!

* * *

MOUNTAINEER'S ADVENTURE

A FAMOUS name in the West of long ago was that of John Colter. He was one of the members of the Lewis and Clark expedition which explored the Missouri River, crossed the Continental Divide and went on to the Pacific. When they returned, heading for St. Louis to make their report and receive a heroes' welcome, Colter decided to leave the party. He had seen the richness of the beaver to be had in the rivers of the West, and he became one of the first of the fur trappers in that region.

With a friend named Potts, he was paddling down-river one day when suddenly he saw a number of Blackfeet Indians on the shore. Potts had not time to turn, but was instantly peppered with arrows. In the fraction of a second's warning which he had, Colter dived into the river.

The Blackfeet swarm after him, caught him and dragged him onto the bank. Instead of burning him at the stake, or otherwise torturing him in some tame manner, they decided to have some sport with him. They stripped off his clothes, told him to run, and gave him a hundred yard start. Then the young warriors started in pursuit.

Colter had toughness and endurance, and though hampered by bare feet, began to outdistance the band, all except one speedy lad who swiftly closed in on him. When almost upon him, the Indian started to swing a lance at Colter. Colter stopped suddenly, and spat tobacco juice between the eyes of the redskin. In the split second of the Indian's surprise, Colter grabbed the lance and plunged it through the heart of his enemy.

The rest of the Blackfeet, seeing this, redoubled their efforts to catch Colter, and he was in a bad way. Racing onward, he came to the river and plunged in, coming up under a mass of trash and logs. Here he clung until dark, undetected by the Blackfeet, who searched the shore and even ran over the logs which sheltered him.

When the redskins finally gave up and went away, Colter, shivering with cold and nakedness, climbed out of the water and set out for the near-

est trading fort.

He told of springs of boiling hot water, some of them shooting far into the air at regular intervals; of bubbling springs of mud, of a huge lake, and a great waterfall. His listeners thought he must be a little "touched" by his naked ordeal, and someone remarked that it sounded like a hell of a country. "Colter's hell," said another. And so the place came to be called "Colter's Hell," for the mountain men found that Colter had not lied and that there was indeed such a place of bubbling mud and hot shooting springs. Later on the place was given a more dignified name—Yellowstone National Park. —*By J. Byrne.*

NARROW-GAUGE RAILWAY

By J. LESLIE

SCATTERED throughout the West are the rusting remnants of many miniature railroads —by "miniature" is meant narrow gauge. Usually these are found near abandoned mine-sites. The story of narrow gauge railroads and the part that they played in opening up the West is a fascinating one. They have none of the great impressiveness of their big brothers, the standard gauge railroads, but they performed their job well.

A great deal of the industrial strength of the United States comes from its mines and in turn a great many of the most important mines were and are out West. Copper, lead, and zinc—extremely important metals in the electrical civilization that was developing in the nineties—came for the most part, not from foreign imports, but from the mines in the West.

The wealthy railroads would not necessarily build spurs leading to any mine that was discovered, no matter how valuable, unless they shared a good deal of the profit. Sometimes, it must be said to their credit, it was not feasible economically. Yet the ore had to be taken to refineries or delivered either in the form of ore or metal to main line roads in order to be taken East and sold. If the railroads cooperated—fine, but if they didn't it was necessary for the mine-owner to build his own. Now building and running a railroad is a gigantic enterprise, no matter how small the road, consequently a crude road and a small one, usually in the form of a narrow gauge railroad, was built. Small locomotives were purchased, and simple ore cars were hauled to the major main lines of regular roads. The narrow gauge roads were operated by the mine-owners. After the mine had been worked out, or with the coming of the truck, the narrow gauge road fell into disuse and was abandoned. But in its short and active life the narrow gauge railroad made western history.

The old Casana Copper Mining Company in northern Arizona, long since defunct, created a saga of narrow gauge railroading that is a gem.

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The Company, organized about eighteen ninety-three, produced copper ore from its mines, refined it on the spot, and shipped the pigs of metal eleven miles over the roughest narrow gauge railroad in the West—the "C.C.M. & C." This road led its devious and tortuous path over short mountainous territory to the town of Casana which practically was supported and maintained by the company. A spur of the Southern Pacific led Eastward to a main line branch of the road and the refined copper went this way.

THE "C.C.M. & C." was run by two veterans—not of the rails—but of the horse. Shorty Haines, a bow-legged, good-humored veteran of the Apache warfare days, and his side-kick, a young kid by the name of Billy Clayton, ran the railroad. Their duties were very simple. Once a day they made the round trip out to the mine, picked up a load of copper pigs, returned to town, had the three flat cars unloaded, and repeated the trip the next day and the next. They also furnished transportation for any miners going into town in the evenings.

Such a job might seem monotonous, but it wasn't, for the trip held more elements of danger than we like to imagine. To begin with, the narrow gauge roadbed wasn't in the best of condition, and there were spots where the chugging little locomotive could hardly make the grades. But Shorty and Billy tended it like a baby and usually managed to make it work its puffing way to and from the town. The trip was invariably a slow and hair-raising procedure.

Old-timers love to tell of the time Shorty was chased by his infernal train. The three flat cars had been heavily loaded that day with massive pigs of copper—it had been an unusually productive day, and Shorty and his fireman had to nurse their grunting charge all the way. Half-way to Casana, while the train was going slowly down-grade with Shorty judiciously applying the brakes, the coupling between the tender and the first flat-car broke. The locomotive's brakes slipped and it shot forward like a bullet—now released of its load. But because of the down-grade, the heavily-laden flat-cars gathered momentum and

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started to overtake the locomotive! To top it off, in the jerk that ensued at the parting of the cars, Shorty slipped forward, his six-gun went off at his side and he suffered a nasty wound in his right leg. But Shorty was made of stern stuff. He ignored the wound.

THE flat-cars were overtaking the locomotive with ever-increasing speed and if Shorty had sped up the engine to avoid them, eventually they would have derailed themselves on the uneven track. Shorty sent Billy to the end of the small tender and told him to get ready to put a new pin in the coupler—trains were coupled in those days with a crude pin-socket arrangement—and Billy poised precariously on the end of the tender with the cars coming at him faster and faster.

Shorty payed no attention to his wound, but with infinite skill he began to match the speed of the engine to the oncoming cars. Inch by inch the cars began to overtake the engine until with superb judgment, Shorty had them in position and Billy, still balancing dangerously, managed to drop in the necessary pin which had sheared.

Then gradually applying the brakes, Shorty managed to halt the juggernaut which had threatened him. All was well! He made it.

Only then did he turn over the throttle to Billy while he looked at his wound. Cursing in true fighter fashion, he bound it up with his shirt; the doc could take out the bullet.

While this event has its humorous aspects, not all troubles were of that sort. Train-robbers liked the narrow gauges too, because often they carried payrolls. In addition they were often operated in territory containing hostile Indians and a rifle was as important as a shovel in any locomotive.

The service these short-haul railroads rendered to general American welfare is incalculable, and now, though only a few rusting rails remain with perhaps the remnants of a sod-covered boiler, the narrow gauge railroad will be remembered for a long time for the services it offered to the early West.

MYSTERIOUS MIGRATION

By JOSEPH WARD

THE fact that birds migrate is common knowledge, and easily observed in the spring and autumn of the year. Naturalists have charted their journeys and studied their habits in detail. It is a lesser known fact that many insects and also fish migrate to warmer climates for the winter months. The habits of these creatures present many mysteries to the scientists who strive to learn their secrets.

The familiar black and orange Monarch butterflies flock with their kind and fly southward in a great mass as the autumn temperatures drop.

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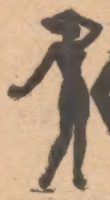

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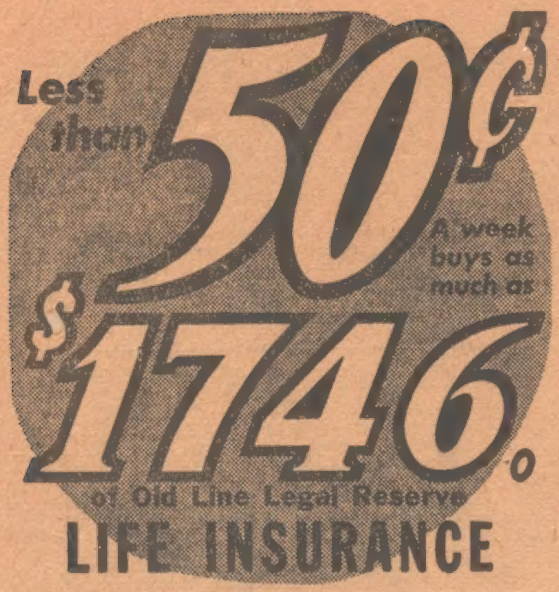

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Sometimes they have been observed flying along in single file, and sometimes in great clouds moving very high and very swiftly. Occasionally the swarm alights to rest, and the numbers have been estimated at thousands, even hundreds of thousands. Where are they going? How do they spend the winter? Do they return in the spring? Probably many of them die along the way, but some of them undoubtedly reach the southern parts of the United States. There they spend the winter months in some form of hibernation. Pale, ragged-winged Monarchs have been seen flying northward in the springtime, and it must be that they are the same which searched for a warmer climate the preceding autumn, and have come back to complete their migration, moved by some irresistible force of Nature.

Several species of dragon flies have been observed to fly in a southerly direction in the autumn, and northerly in the spring. An autumn leavetaking of the north has also been noted in other species of insects. Is this a true migration? Why and how are these movements made? There is very little data on the subject, but there is reason to believe that prevailing winds and barometric pressure may account in part for these insect flights.

The ocean experiences great autumnal migrations. Many fish desert their summer haunts, as do crabs, lobsters and other sea animals. The sea birds which follow this seasonal movement are the betrayal that it is in progress. They are after the floating fragments of food left by the predacious fish, and follow the underwater masses for many miles. Where are the fish going? Perhaps they hibernate somewhere along the ocean floor. Perhaps they swim southward to warmer waters. The question is unanswered.

The habits and history of many creatures of land, air and water are imperfectly known. Some instinct for survival and a mysterious purpose directs their movements, and leads them through their life cycles in conditions best suited to the continuance of their kind. Man has come but a short way in the solving of the multitudinous enigmas of Nature.

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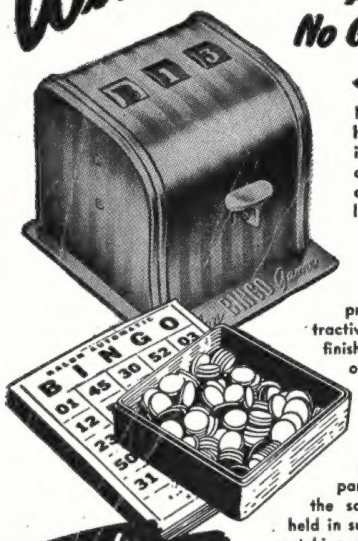

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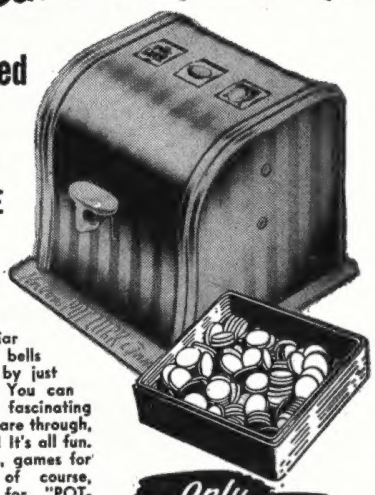

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